

**Exploring Students' Experience of Academic Transition to University: A Study of the UAE
National Students**

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the
degree of Doctor of Education by Bushra Foroodian

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Abstract

When students embark on their higher education journey, it can be a challenging time for them as they learn to foster relationships with faculty and their fellow peers. It can also be a difficult time for them as they negotiate and learn to become accustomed to the expectations of the new academic community they are joining. Most existing research on student transition stems from North America, Australia and the United Kingdom but there is limited study on the United Arab Emirates. This study therefore aimed to address this gap in literature by exploring the Emirati student experience of academic transition during their first year. It was carried out as a case study using a mixed-method sequential exploratory design where qualitative data was collected from 20 semi-structured interviews while survey questions were used to collect quantitative data from 377 first-year Emirati students. Bridges transition theory was used as a framework to explain overlapping phases of transition. Four main findings emerged from this study: students experienced the most difficulty in academic transition during their first few weeks; they had similar experiences of academic transition in federal institutions; male students had a significantly more positive experience of transition than their female counterparts in private universities; and male students found it more challenging than their female counterparts when working with Emiratis of the opposite gender.

Keywords: first-year experience; academic transition; gender; higher education; United Arab Emirates

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When students embark on a path of higher education crossing over from secondary education to university, it can be a critical period in their educational journey. While this can be an exciting time of change, it can also be challenging as they learn to foster relationships with faculty and their fellow peers. It can also be a difficult time for students as they negotiate and learn to become accustomed to the expectations of the new academic community they are joining (Keating, Davis & Holden, 2006). Past research indicates that almost all students undergo adjustments upon entry to university and that these can present academic, social, personal and lifestyle challenges (Abdullah, Elias, Mahyuddin & Uli, 2009). The first-year experience has been described as a time of adjusting, thriving or surviving (Kift, 2015) and can be critical in determining a student's academic success. The experience can impact positively on academic performance and future achievement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). It can give first-year students a sense of belonging (Coates, Kelly, & Naylor, 2016; Naylor, 2017) and can support the development of new learning behaviours (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). There can also be social gains through different types of interactions with faculty and peers (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). In contrast, the experience can present challenges resulting in stress and anxiety (Gale & Parker, 2014; Lowe & Cook, 2003). First-year students may feel lonely (Parker, Duffy, Wood, Bond & Hogan, 2005) and as a result, can typically underperform (Rosenstreich & Margalit, 2015). Under-performance can also be a result of feeling ill-prepared academically (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

Some students manage to adjust and adapt to the academic demands in a constructive way whereas others can struggle or feel completely overwhelmed with the changes they need to take on board. As such, students experience the problems of transition to higher education differently and adjust to the varying demands according to their own pace of development (Dyson & Renk,

2006). The inner psychological process or inner reorientation one would go through when reacting to external changes, such as those experienced during the first year at university is described as transition. Transition is experienced by everyone in a personal way and moves at an individual's natural pace as they internalize and come to terms with a new situation and the changes it brings (Bridges, 2011). *Academic transition* can be seen as an inner reorientation that a student goes through as they navigate their way through the *academic* demands that are presented with during higher education.

In this thesis I explored the student experience of academic transition during their first year at university. This case study is of national students, known as Emiratis, who attend higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). From my experience as an educator in the region, and my interactions with Emirati students, they recognize the value of higher education and the importance of Emiratis contributing to the knowledge economy. They have also described experiences such as excitement, anxiety and frustration during their first year at university. My inspiration for this research began while working in the public and private school sector. In the public sector, I regularly engaged with employees from what was then known as Abu Dhabi's Education Council (ADEC) in preparing materials to train teachers, leaders, principals, and academic quality assurance officers. Discussions often took place about how prepared Emirati students are academically for university and how well they would be able to adapt to the unfamiliar academic demands and expectations of a higher education institution (HEI).

I wanted to undertake this piece of work in order to gauge a better understanding of the experiences the Emirati students had described, and because of my professional interest in the research. I have, for many years worked in schools as a secondary school teacher and subsequently as an academic leader in the UK, and now in the UAE. In these roles, I have spent a

significant amount of time with students discussing their aspirations for future goals, careers, employment and education. In my experience, many students see higher education as a pathway to future career success, but few are aware of the differences between secondary or high school education and that which they will experience at university. In my current employment at a private school in Abu Dhabi, it is common for former students to visit and meet their old teachers. On hearing former students talking about their range of experiences of academic transition to university, I questioned how well schools had been preparing them for the university experience, and how well the transition has been managed by universities thus far. I also questioned that if we had a better understanding of their experiences, whether modifications in the school and university approach could support a more successful student experience of academic transition.

1.1 The UAE Context

The UAE's educational landscape is rapidly evolving. In previous decades the majority of Emiratis had attended only public schools in the UAE and went on to study at universities abroad. However, in recent years, the choice has broadened, and they have been able to attend schools and HEIs in the UAE's public or private sector. Since its formation in 1971, the UAE has enjoyed strong economic growth and has attracted success seekers from around the globe. This attractiveness has led to an exponential growth in its population with a vibrant expatriate community making up 88.5% and Emiratis making up 11.5% (Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority, 2017). The UAE embraces diversity and welcomes international influences whilst still holding on to its culture and traditions. It is an ambitious nation that has experienced unparalleled growth and remarkable change in the past 30 years. The UAE has witnessed several education reforms, visions and strategies from government ministries which together make this

research study significant and relevant. The education reforms have aimed to align the work done in schools and HEIs, and to ensure that HEIs produce a generation of Emiratis who are highly educated and skilled graduates. There is a strong focus on developing the UAE's human capital in order to meet the UAE 2021 vision.

Education in the UAE comprises of two sectors: the public (also known as the federal or government sector) and the private sector. Historically, the vast majority of Emiratis attended the government-run public schools and HEIs, but a change has been observed. The private school sector is growing and there has been a steady increase in the proportion of Emiratis opting to attend private rather than public schools (MOE, 2019). The trend emerging is that Emirati students are opting out of the public-school sector and moving into the private school sector. Not only is the education landscape changing for schools, it is also changing for HEIs. Between 1990 and 2013 the number of accredited HEIs in the UAE has seen a staggering 14-fold increase (MOE, 2019; Ridge, 2010). Private HEIs have historically had a large proportion of students who are expatriates however there has been a recent increase in the number of Emiratis enrolling in this sector (Ridge et al., 2015; Swan, 2014). Federal universities, which I refer to as public HEIs are attended by Emirati students (Swan, 2016). Other HEIs are described as semi-public due to receiving partial or full financial backing, or they are described as private. I have included both under the category of private HEIs.

The post-secondary school education pathways are illustrated in Figure 1.1.

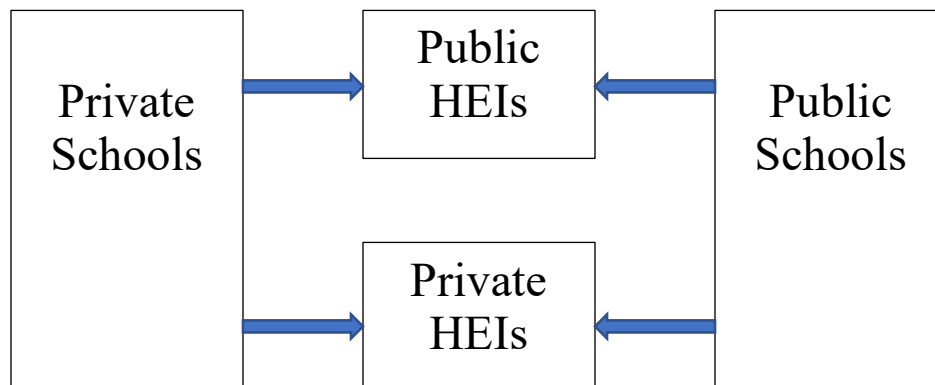


Figure 1.1. Pathways to Higher Education in the UAE

One major difference is gender segregation where the public sector is predominantly gender segregated, but the private sector is co-educational. Public HEIs are gender segregated, where a male campus is located in a different part of an Emirate to the female campus or where there is strict security between the two campuses if they are adjacent to one another. The UAE higher education private sector on the other hand has a number of co-educational campuses (Ridge, Kippels, & ElAsad, 2015). Prior to 2018, this was the same for schools. Public schools were completely gender segregated and had large Emirati populations (Ministry of Education [MOE] UAE, 2019). Private schools which were dominated by an expatriate population were co-educational.

In recent years, and through the UAE's rapid economic development, attitudes towards gender roles and interactions are beginning to change and policies are being put in place to achieve the UAE's 2021 vision. With a strong view towards developing the UAE's human capital, one aim is to empower women and increase the number of Emirati females who are currently underrepresented in fields like science, technology, engineering and mathematics as well as those in managerial roles (UAE Vision 2021, 2018). This would mean more women in the workplace, which has been traditionally been dominated by men. However, Emiratis live in a

culturally conservative society where men and women do not mix socially even though they are increasingly working side by side in their place of employment (Alibeli, 2014). Whilst progressive government policies are being adopted to empower women and open up more employment opportunities for them, a balance is being sought in a nation where cultural and Islamic traditions continue to prevail.

In 2018, a policy was introduced by the MOE to combat issues students might face in maintaining professional relationships in their future workplace, or in higher education (Ministry of Education [MOE] UAE, 2019). This change aimed at making students better prepared for the transition by integrating co-education to previously gender-segregated public-school classrooms. The move was only applied to students up to Grade 4 and received a mixed response from Emiratis; some applauded the move, while others resisted. The decision was also questioned because students would be expected to return to gender-segregated classes from Grade 5 upwards and throughout their public education. Even with the resistance, more Emiratis continue to be enrolled in private co-educational institutions as a shift in attitudes continues to develop. As reforms continue to be introduced in this ever-evolving society, it is the younger generation whose attitudes are changing more rapidly. For example, as the number of women managers increases, the attitudes towards them are becoming more positive, but this is predominantly amongst college students rather than with older generations (Mostafa, 2010).

In summary, the UAE education system is unique, complex and evolving at all levels. Emirati students are choosing to attend either public or private sector schools with a shift towards the private sector especially in the two dominant Emirates of Dubai and the capital, Abu Dhabi (Ridge et al., 2015). Coupled with the evolving education system is the changing attitudes of Emiratis towards gender roles and interactions.

1.2 Research Problem

The UAE has a rapidly expanding and diverse population, and a growing economy and has invested in an ever-increasing network of schools and HEIs. Emiratis have the choice of attending public or private schools and HEIs. As it looks to the future, it wants Emiratis to successfully graduate and contribute to the knowledge economy. In 2007, the UAE government issued a report which had its main focus to increase the number of Emiratis graduating from university (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2007). Implementation of this plan has resulted in an increase in the number of Emiratis enrolling as undergraduates with women continuing to dominate the public gender-segregated HEIs (Ridge et al., 2015). A shift is appearing however, as the educational landscape continues to change and the choice of public and private HEI broadens. In 2016, 47% of Emiratis enrolled at private HEIs. With a drive to educate Emiratis and increasing enrolment, one would also expect a higher graduation rate coupled with a higher employment rate, but this is not the case. Although the UAE enjoys a low unemployment rate; it was 2.58% in 2018 (Ministry of Economy UAE, 2018), this is due to the large expatriate population. The jobless rate of Emiratis is increasing, and this is particularly alarming for Emirati youth. In Dubai for example, the unemployment rate of Emiratis rose from 2.9% in 2016 to 4% in 2018 (Dubai Statistics Centre, 2018). Youth unemployment stood at 7.77% in 2018 (Statistics Centre Abu Dhabi, 2018). Questions are being asked about what is happening at university, and if more Emiratis are enrolling in higher education, why does the nation not have an increasing number of Emiratis being employed? By exploring the Emirati student experiences of academic transition during their first year in higher education, it may be possible to shine a light on which experiences have enabled them to thrive, as well as those experiences which have caused first-year Emirati students to dive. By exploring these academic experiences across the duration of a student's first year in higher education, it may be possible to

pinpoint key time periods when intervention may both be necessary, and of benefit to support academic transition, thereby increasing the likelihood of academic success and improved graduation rates. It may also provide insight into where modifications to current programs or additional academic support programs could be put in place to support Emirati students in their experience of academic transition during their crucial first year at university.

Another question being asked is about the male-female divide. The UAE's 2021 vision is to increase the number of both male and female Emiratis joining the UAE workforce (UAE Vision 2021, 2018) and the success of Emiratis in HEIs is imperative for this vision to be achieved. A crucial part of the success of university students is the successful completion of their first year. Concerns have been raised about high attrition rates of male Emiratis during their first year (Ridge, 2010), females outperforming their male counterparts (Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs, n.d.; Ridge, 2009), and of large numbers of Emiratis opting to student abroad rather than availing of the higher education on offer in the UAE. Questions continue to be raised about the gender imbalance and what causes Emirati men and women to thrive, survive and dive in the UAE's HEIs. Taking into consideration the changing attitudes of Emiratis towards gender roles and interactions, and the delicate balance between a progressive nation and one which wants to hold on to its heritage, culture and traditions, the experiences of academic transition may differ between male and female Emirati students. Those positive, negative or changing experiences of academic transition could be magnified depending on the student's gender, whether they attend a gender segregated or co-educational HEI, and on their attitudes towards gender roles and interactions. This research aims to shed light on the first-year experience of academic transition of Emirati students, both male and female, attending public and private HEIs in the UAE, and may offer insights and understandings for practitioners, researchers and policy makers.

1.3 Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research study was *to explore the experiences of academic transition for Emirati students in their first year at a HEI in the UAE*. It is developed around three research questions:

1. What are the academic transition experiences of Emirati students during their first year at a HEI in the UAE?
2. How has gender affected the experience of academic transition of Emirati students in HEIs in the UAE?
3. How have different types of HEIs affected the student academic transition experience?

1.4 Justification for the Research

Many scholars continue to debate the concept of first-year experience in HEIs with a significant number of studies stemming from the UK, US and Australia. Examples of such debates include those on academic adjustment and success, student engagement and satisfaction, social adjustment, retention and attrition. Higher education can be “complex and difficult” (Gale & Parker, 2014, p.739) resulting in low retention rates in the first year compared to following years (Tinto, 1993). In the UK, first year dropout rates had risen for the third year in a row (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018), in Australia it has been steadily increasing since 2009 (Cherastidtham & Norton, 2018), and is as high as one in three in the US (“Freshman Retention Rate National Universities”, 2019). Factors affecting attrition during the first year had underlying causes including academic ability and preparedness, time dedicated to studying, study practices, academic support, teaching quality, motivation and persistence. The majority of studies of the first-year experience in HEIs have been conducted in developed countries. As the debates about continue, the phenomenon in developing countries such as the UAE is more

complex due to their evolving education systems, and the limitations that exist when comparing their respective background and experience to HEIs in western countries. Whilst the first-year experience has been widely researched, and with the knowledge that this is a time of significant impact on a student's academic success, there is a paucity of research in this field in the UAE. This study takes steps towards covering this gap in literature and may offer valuable insights and new understanding for practitioners in the field.

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

This is a summary of the structure of this thesis:

Chapter 2: This chapter provides a critical review of the literature by firstly exploring the concept of transition and factors affecting academic transition. I then critically analyse research findings on academic preparedness, learning expectations, teaching, learning strategies, assessment, feedback, and peer interactions, and I explore the impact of gender on the student experience during their first year in higher education. I also discuss the theoretical framework that was used to explore the first-year experience. This includes literature on Bridges Transition Model.

Chapter 3: This chapter describes the methodology used to explore the topic, research design, the participants, how data was collected and analysed, and limitations of this study. It describes how interpretivism underpins the research approach where a mixed-methods design was adopted to explore the first-year student experience. A sequential exploratory design was used hence data was collected in two stages or phases. Qualitative data was collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Following thematic analysis of the interview data using NVIVO©, a survey was developed in the quantitative phase. SPSS© was used to analyse the survey data. The findings were integrated and presented together.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents the findings. It includes biographical information about the participants and the themes which emerged during the two stages of data analysis. Justification of the findings is provided using participants' interview responses and analysis from the survey. Clear reasoning is also used to support the findings and interpretations in the discussion section. Several themes emerged. One key theme was that students still had an attachment to their school reflecting on familiarity with teaching styles, assessment methods and working with people they had known for many years. Another theme was faculty influences on the experience of academic transition through teaching methods and interactions with their students. Students also described developing a new learner identity as an Emirati higher education learner. The Emirati identity was another factor highlighted when students described their interactions in lectures and group tasks. A significant finding was the positive experience of male Emiratis attending private universities compared to female students attending the same institutions and compared to Emirati students in public HEIs. This chapter synthesizes and discusses the findings and analysis from this study in response to the research questions and literature review. It also outlines implications from the findings.

Chapter 5: The final chapter presents the conclusion which includes the contribution to knowledge, limitations to the study, recommendations for practice and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter comprises of four main sections. It begins with a review of how different authors describe the concept of transition and explores the idea of learner identity. This research study aimed to explore the student experience of academic transition, yet there is no agreement on what ‘transition’ actually means. ‘Transition’ is a term used in various fields of study and as such it is conceptualized to suit whichever research approach is adopted. Different conceptualisations are explored and the section concludes with a description from Bridges (2011) of transition and an adaptation describing academic transition. The second section examines literature on the factors affecting academic transition. This section is organized to follow the student experience as they move through their first year. It begins with how well students are prepared academically and their struggles in dealing with the new learning expectations, the learning or academic environment and teaching methods. It moves on to examine literature on how a student’s learning strategies may change during the course of their first-year and how they adapt to the different styles of assessment. It concludes by examining literature on the experience students have when interacting with their peers and faculty. The third section focuses on the impact gender has on the experience of academic transition. A gap in literature from the UAE had been identified when looking at academic transition but literature from the region does exist on gender studies and this was drawn upon and included in this section. There were many contrasting views of male and female attitudes towards learning, their learning expectations, fear of failure and how they prefer to interact with faculty and their peers. Several of these contrasting views and claims were tested by means of this study. The final section presents the theoretical framework that was used in this study. Bridges transition model (2011) is explored and applied to the first-year student experience by comparing it to overlapping phases of *endings* (or the past), a *neutral zone*, and *beginnings*.

2. 1 The Concepts of Transition

The first-year experience is often described as student transition to university yet there is a lack of clarity when defining the term ‘transition’ (Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2010).

Transition is of interest in many fields of study but whilst this contributes to such a rich and diverse body of literature, the term ‘transition’ can be interpreted in different ways. Gale and Parker (2014) suggest that researchers choose to describe the concept of transition to suit their research approach and use the term without explicitly defining what transition actually means. Colley (2007) acknowledges the difficulty in arriving at an agreed definition by providing a somewhat broader view of concept of transition describing it as “a process of change over time” (Colley, 2007, p.428). Other descriptions place responsibility on the individual experiencing the transition. Perry and Allard (2003) describe transition as the processes taking place in the mind when someone experiences change. Hviid and Zittoun, (2008) and Bridges (2011) suggest transition occurs when a form of adjustment is required, whilst Gale and Parker (2014) refer to transition as a student’s capabilities to navigate change.

Ecclestone (2006) suggested four ways that transition can be conceptualized: as *institutional*, through *learner identity*, in *being and becoming*, and as a *permanent human state*. Institutional transition places the process solely with the individual as they move between educational settings such as school and university. But it neglects the impact of social, cultural and societal factors. The second conceptualization of transition focuses on learner identity. Ecclestone (2006) described this as changes within the individual that emerge as a product of the institution and their social expectations. In a later study, Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes (2010) describe this transition as identity making. The formation of learner identity through transition is discussed in several studies. Without explicitly defining the term transition, Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) describe how a student can develop their identity as a learner in school. This identity

can change as they transition to university (Huon & Sankey, 2002) where they become more confident and independent learners (Fazey & Fazey, 2001). Student satisfaction in university represents feelings of belonging (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Meehan & Howells, 2018). Learner identity influences participation (Turner & Tobbell, 2018) and is enhanced by positive relationships with staff and other students (Keup, 2005) where students grow into their new role (Wilson, Murphy, Pearson, Wallace, Reher, & Buys, 2014). Development of a new learner identity is also tied to student achievement (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; MacFarlane, 2018).

Ecclestone's (2006) third conceptualization focuses on the transition of 'being and becoming' which occurs when an individual has experienced a significant event and comes to terms with the feelings they experienced during that time. It does not take into account the educational environment or context. The final conceptualization used in post-modern and feminist studies suggests that the process of transition is continuous and iterative rejecting the idea that it happens as a result of a distinct event or change (O'Donnell, Kean, & Stevens, 2016).

Gale and Parker (2014) describe two general conceptualisations when describing transition specifically at the university level. These are "*transition as induction*" (p.739), and "*transition as development*" (p.741). Many studies of the student experience in their first year at university have emerged as a result of Gale and Parker's description of transition as induction. If transition is viewed as occurring over a discrete period of time, then the first year at university can be seen as the beginning of an individual's higher education journey. Those describing transition as induction concentrate their research studies on orientation programs. Yet even within this field of study, transition continues to be described in different ways. Quinn (2010) suggests transition occurs at a fixed point in time whereas others describe it as a process or journey (Furlong, 2009; Gill et al., 2011). Edvardsson, Stiwnne, and Jungert (2010) suggest

transition occurs through sequential periods of adjustment. Other researchers define it as the process of multidimensional changes (Lent et al., 2007) or multiple, concurrent transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2010). The second broad conceptualization of transition described by Gale and Parker (2014) is where it is described as *development*, and researchers have used this when focusing on student identity. Krause and Coates (2008) describe this transition as the time when students develop into university students. Hussey and Smith (2010) describe it as a time when a student moves from one level of intellectual maturity to another. In studies where the concept of *transition as development* has been used, findings have related to student learning and engagement and different approaches in interactions (Kot, 2014; Krause & Coates, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ramsden, 2003; Vinson, Nixon, Walsh, Walker, Mitchell, & Zaitseva, 2010). Even though Gale and Parker's (2014) concepts of "transition as induction" (p.739) and "transition as development" (p.741) have been described and categorized, they are problematic. This is because, due to their descriptions of transition, authors tend not to take their research beyond focusing on what transition is and what seems to be missing is an understanding of why transition happens and how it is experienced

Almost all students undergo a phase of adjustment when they embark on higher education. The way in which the adjustment is experienced and how it develops is different for every individual (Dyson & Renk, 2006). Transition occurs when there is a change; whether that is a change in routines, expectations, or a student's role and responsibilities (Goodman, 2014) and the notion of academic transition in particular can be considered in different ways. The experience of transition is complex and constantly changing as students try to navigate through a change they are experiencing (Mercer, 2007). Literature on life transition aims to describe why negotiating a transition can be easy for some student whilst others struggle (Nicholson, 1990). Nicholson suggests that people first need to be ready or prepared for the change and that this

readiness will make the actual transition less challenging. This readiness means that students should have an idea of what to expect and be armed with the relevant knowledge and skills to make the transition as smooth as possible (Coertjens et al., 2017; Nicholson, 1990). The focus on students being prepared for transition to higher education aligns with Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory. Schlossberg (1984) focuses on a student's own way of dealing with transition and the support mechanisms in place to assist with their transition.

In summary, what can be agreed upon, is that the experience of transition is a process occurring in a personal way and at an individual's own pace as they respond and make adjustments when an external change has occurred. Bridges (2011) describes this as an inner psychological process or inner orientation. Adapting the description from Bridges, *academic transition* can therefore be seen as an inner reorientation that a student goes through as they navigate their way through the *academic* demands that they are presented with during higher education.

2.2 Factors Affecting Academic Transition

The vast majority of research on the student experience in HEIs has focused in three main contexts: North America (King & Kerr, 2005), the United Kingdom (Yorke & Longden, 2008), and Australia (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). The spotlight on student preparation for university, their expectations and the quality of their experience have been reflected in studies in Australia and the United Kingdom. North American studies however have placed an emphasis on academic and social integration to predict dropout rates (García-Ros, Pérez-González, Cavas-Martínez, & Tomás, 2018; Naylor, Baik, & Arkoudis, 2018). More recent research across North America, the United Kingdom and Australia has placed a spotlight on the experiences of special groups of students, and on the increasing role played by technology in

higher education. Special groups include mature students (Harrison, 2018), those from ethnic minorities (Richardson, 2015), refugees (Ziaian, de Anstiss, & Puvimanasinghe, 2018), those indigenous to Australia (Pitman, Roberts, & Bennett, 2019), international students (Cheng, Adekola, & Shah, 2018), and black students in North America (Brooms, 2018). The body of research looking specifically at the impact of technology on the higher education experience includes STEM (Yang, Volet, Mansfield, 2018), blended learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), online learning (Ellis & Bliuc, 2019), e-learning (Gilbert, Morton & Rowley, 2007; Haythornthwaite, Andrews, & Fransman, 2016), and social media (Chugh & Ruhi, 2018).

The experience of first-year students in higher education is of growing importance. It has been described as a time of adjusting, thriving or surviving (Kift, 2015), when students can be more vulnerable to languishing (Knoesen & Naudé, 2018), or when students can be identified as ‘divers’ or ‘thrivers’ (Beattie, Laliberte, Michard-Leclerc, & Oreopoulos, 2019). Student experiences in their first-year at university can be critical in determining their academic success. On the one hand, the experience can impact positively on academic performance according to their grade point average (GPA), and to their potential achievements in the future (Haggis, 2006; Hultberg, Plos, Hendry & Kjellgren, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Robbins et al., 2014; York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015; Zajda & Rust, 2016). It can give first-year students a sense of achievement and belonging (Coates, Kelly, & Naylor, 2016; Naylor, 2017). It can support the development of new learning behaviours (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Kuh et al., 2006; Malinga-Musamba, 2014; Mayhew et al, 2016; van der Zanden, Denessen, Cillessen, & Meijer, 2018). There can also be social gains through the different types of interactions with faculty and peers (Bowman, 2014; Krause, 2001; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Yau, Sung & Cheng, 2013).

In contrast, the first-year experience can present challenges to students and may result in stress and anxiety about letting go of familiar habits and routines (Evans, 2000; Gale & Parker, 2014; Lowe & Cook, 2003). First-year students may feel lonely (Parker et al., 2005) and as a result, can typically underperform (Rosenstreich & Margalit, 2015) finding the academics overwhelming (Knoesen & Naudé, 2018). Under-performance can also be a result of feeling ill-prepared academically (Lowe & Cook, 2003). During their first year, students may decide they are not suited to their course (García-Ros, Fuentes, & Pérez-González, 2016; Katanis, 2000; McInnis, 2001; Yorke & Longden, 2008; van Rooij, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2018), or that they have chosen the wrong institution (Rodríguez, Tinajero, & Páramo, 2017).

2.2.1 Academic Preparedness

A learner's identity is developed through their educational experience, not only during their first year in university, but also through their pre-university learning experience (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Ecclestone, 2006;). Studies have shown that the school learning experience and a student's perceived academic preparedness can impact on their successful transition to university. Academic success or achievement is most commonly related to a students' GPA (Robbins et al., 2004). However, when comparing students' GPA scores in high school with those in university, some studies found a positive correlation (Arnold & Rowaan, 2014; Bowman, 2014; Kot, 2014). whereas others found no significant effect (Friedman & Mandel, 2011; Kurland & Siegel, 2013; Vulperhorst, Christel, de Kleijn, & van Tartwijk., 2018).

Students who are well organized and confident experience a more successful transition to university (Valadas et al., 2018). Those who have a clear idea of their career direction will experience transition more easily than those whose career goals remain unclear (Tinto, 1987). Students who feel well prepared also tend to be more motivated than those who feel less

prepared and as such experience transition with more ease (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002). Academic self-efficacy also impacts on the experience of transition with most research suggesting a positive correlation between self-efficacy and academic success. Crede and Niehorster (2012) also found that students who are well prepared, confident and motivated are more successful when adjusting to the university environment. Brooman and Darwent (2014) support these studies and finding that students with academic self-efficacy experience successful academic transition. Academic self-efficacy and optimism also relate positively to coping with stress, classroom performance, and on overall satisfaction (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). It is also argued that when a student is confident that they can do well in a task they have been set, this can be a predictor of performance and GPA scores (Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005; Zhou et al., 2015). Self-efficacy, along with positive emotions and course belonging contribute to students perceiving themselves as successful (Picton, Kahu, & Nelson, 2018). It can also increase the likelihood of retention and future achievement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2007). However, whilst a positive correlation between academic self-efficacy and academic achievement does exist, less is known about the development of academic self-efficacy, especially those who are new to higher education (Elias, 2008).

Students' lack of academic preparedness has been debated in many studies with authors agreeing that more research needs to be done to examine this phenomenon. Disagreement however exists on where the responsibility lies and what actions should be taken. Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005) claimed that one third of all students are concerned that they lack the necessary skills and knowledge for higher education. McInnis (2001) raises concern that students are in difficulty from the moment their course begins. Briggs, Clark, and Hall (2012) suggest students struggle imagining what life will be like at university, and also have difficulty

accurately predicting their first-year experience. This concern is echoed by Crisp, Palmer, Turnbull, Nettelbeck, and Ward (2009) who argue that students struggle to understand how different the academic demands will be in university when compared to those in school. There is a general consensus that students are often ill-prepared to cope with university teaching in particular (Lowe & Cooke, 2003). In a study based in the UAE of first-year female students in their first year, Burt (2004) found that students were inadequately prepared to be active learners as the majority had come from a teacher-centred passive learning environment in school. Jones (2011) also found that a worryingly high percentage of students were arriving at university without the necessary academic skills to study a biology degree program in a UK based university. Jones suggests that the A-level curricula focuses on knowledge rather than skills but also argues that classes to improve students' skills in literacy and numeracy should not be the university's responsibility. Hoyles, Newman and Noss (2001) posit that students embarking on mathematics degrees have always lacked the necessary academic skills and lay the blame on the trend towards utilitarian higher education. They argue that reason students are taking a mathematics degree and their learning expectations is far removed from to the expectations first year mathematics students had decades earlier. In contrast, Money, Nixon, and Graham (2019) suggest that even though students may struggle when leaving behind the rigidly structured and supportive school environment to that of higher education, all they need to be successful is being able to learn independently and having confidence in their abilities. Such research suggests that a mismatch exists between the qualities and skills a student is expected to have to start their first-year course compared to the skills university teachers expect students to have (Stevenson & O'Keefe, 2011).

Authors disagree on where responsibility lies to support student during the time when they are ending their school experience and beginning their university experience. Jones (2011)

places the responsibility with schools to ‘up skill’ first-year university students. Others recommend universities provide enabling programs to provide potential students with an open and transparent view of what it is like to study as an undergraduate (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). They stress the need for transition programs (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016) to enhance the sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2011) and improve GPA (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013; van Herpen, Meeuwisse, Hofman, & Severiens, 2019). It is also argued that an integrated, structured intervention program could offer students additional support to overcome barriers to success (Deveci & Ayish, 2017). Others suggest orientation programs to support skills development (Krause & Coates, 2008). Tierney (2000) however argues that universities can be inflexible in adapting to their students. Money et al. (2019) take a broader view in this debate, stressing the need for both sides to bridge the gap between the two levels of education rather than leaving the student to navigate the transition alone. Brigg, Clark and Hall (2012) share this opinion and encourage schools, colleges and universities to apply an integrated system of transition.

2.2.2 Different Learning Expectations

Students in their first year at university expect a different experience to high school and know that they need to put in the hard work (Balloo, 2018). However, they may stick to the tried and tested ways of learning that had been successful for them in the past, expecting that this can be maintained and will be successful at university too (Evans, 2000). In reality, they enter an ‘alien environment’ (Askham, 2008) and find university culture and expectations to be far different to those from school (Reay, 2002). Students with academic self-efficacy, accustomed to achieving top grades and excelling in their learning can consistently fall short of their own expectations (Beattie et al., 2019; Evans, 2000). With this mismatch between their expectations

and experiences even students who were high achievers in high school can struggle academically in university (Birch & Miller, 2007). This may result in anxiety (Cano, Martin, Ginns, & Berben, 2017), with students becoming frustrated and potentially withdrawing themselves from involvement in university life as they struggle to fit in with what is expected of them (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). A longitudinal study of students in the United Kingdom from A level to second year in university found that students also experienced challenges adapting to academic literacies (Baker, 2018) suggesting another mismatch between expectations and experience. Fraser and Killen (2003) also highlighted numerous inconsistencies between the way students and professors perceive things reporting that the expectations students have about university can be vastly different to reality, and that this could reduce their chances of academic success.

2.2.3 Learning Environment and Teaching Methods

One of the factors influencing academic transition is the experience of a new learning environment. The learning environment can be defined as “everything that happens in the classroom or department, faculty or university” (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). The experience of moving from one learning environment to another is described by Ecclestone (2006) as institutional transition. Students expect a difference in this experience from high school (Balloo, 2018) but some may experience difficulty in institutional transition, which Morisani, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl and Shone (2010) claim can undermine their academic performance. This claim is supported by other authors who suggest a link between anxiety, course experience and learning (Cano et al, 2017). Al-Murshidi (2014a) conducted a study in the UAE and found that Emirati students were less comfortable with the experience of taking part in large group discussions or in completing presentation assignments. Instead, they were more comfortable participating in small class discussions (Al-Murshidi, 2014a).

Academic achievement has a direct link to learning where knowledge is shared and presented in a clear way that is easily understood (Schneider & Preckel, 2017) yet different views are held by learners and professors regarding the *quality of teaching* (Asikainen, Blomster, & Virtanen, 2018; Budge & Cowlshaw, 2012; Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Sander, Stevenson, King & Coates, 2000). In describing their expectations and experiences of university teachers, students said they wanted those that were passionate about their subject, knowledgeable and had good teaching ability (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Sanders et al., 2000). Students were keen to experience group-based activities and interactive lectures and felt that a good professor was one who could teach well and who was easy to approach (Sanders et al., 2000). When comparing what they had expected of their professors' ability to teach well to what they actually experienced, some students claimed that professors were reading off slides or from the textbook and others did not know the course material (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013). In a student satisfaction survey in a UAE university campus, one of the determining factors was the importance of having good quality lecturers (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). A later UAE study of engineering students found an incompatibility between the preferred learning style of students when compared to the preferred teaching style of their professors (Chowdhury, 2015). Even though collaboration, cooperation and discussion hold value in the learning process (Ellis & Goodyear, 2013; Lyon & Lagowski, 2008), it is also viewed differently by students and teachers. In Budge and Cowlshaw's study (2012) at an Australian university, the views held by students and their professors (or teachers) about teaching and learning were explored and compared. Data was collected from student surveys, teacher surveys and teacher interviews. Students were not interviewed however leaving a missing piece to the puzzle. Professors perceived their approach was student-centred and they discussed the range of activities they used in class to support student learning. Students however claimed to experience teacher-centred lessons where even

though they did some activities the majority of their time in class was spent listening to their teacher. This mismatch was also found in a later study where professors' experiences of the teacher-student interactions were seen as much more positive than students' experiences of the same interactions (Asikainen, Blomster, & Virtanen, 2018).

2.2.4 Learning Strategies

A body of research examines the challenges students face when dealing with the new learning environment. Many first-year students find the process of trying to master academic literacies stressful (Palmer, Levett, Jones, & Smith, 2018) and references are made to students evoking prior experiences to their first year of university learning (Ashwin & Trigwell, 2012). It also includes exploring students' learning styles (Cano et al., 2017; Varunki, Katajavuori, & Postareff, 2017) and how these styles are adapted to suit a large class environment (Herrington & Weaven, 2008). In an attempt to find the optimum teaching style/s to match the preferred learning styles of different groups of students, several studies were conducted in the UAE (Yousef, 2016, 2018, 2019). Results however found that students had many different preferred learning styles and no particular style was dominant. Comparisons are also made between the more traditional learning environment and new learning environment. Dochy, Segers, van den Bossche, and Struyven (2005) investigated how students experienced and engaged in their learning when they were given problem solving tasks. Taylor, Pillay and Clarke (2004) explored the extent to which students could adapt their learning inline with technological innovation, and how this innovation could transform teaching and learning. Putman, Ford, and Tancock (2012) suggested that asynchronous discussions is a beneficial part of the learning process enabling students to become more engaged with their learning at a time that suits them to read. Online and class discussions were also a focus of the work by Han and Ellis (2019) suggesting it leads to

deep learning. The issue of surface and deep learning has also been highlighted by Hall, Ramsay and Raven (2004) who explore the challenges faced by faculty when promoting deep learning with first-year students. Some studies suggest the approach to learning depends on the student. By way of an example, if a student has the intention only of meeting the requirements to complete a course, it is more likely that they will choose to adopt a surface learning approach (Asikainen, Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, Vanthournout, & Coertjens, 2014; Edmunds & Richardson, 2009). Other work however suggests the learning approach adopted may depend on the subject studied. Varunki et al. (2017) found that the type of learning adopted depended on the subject studied and suggested that students studying soft sciences were more likely to adopt deep learning approaches compared to a surface learning approach by those studying natural sciences. Varunki et al. (2017) put this finding down to students' self-regulation skills. Although such research studies provide an insight into student experiences of a new learning environment, they offer more in the way of advice for faculty on approaches to teaching.

An insight into teaching practices was also a focus by Abrami et al. (2015) exploring ways to foster student critical thinking. Critical thinking, described as reasoned and reflective thinking, is seen as an important graduate skill (van der Zanden et al., 2018). A meta-analysis was also conducted to investigate whether there was a difference in students' use of critical thinking skills when they were in higher education (Huber & Kuncel, 2016). Mayhew et al. (2016) provided evidence that students' critical thinking skills did improve during their time at university but there are contradictory studies regarding critical skills. Whilst Hyytinen, Toom & Postareff, (2018) found that most new students were able to develop a deep approach to their learning but that this had no effect on their ability to think critically. Hyytinen et al. (2018) suggested that in order to support students' ability to think critical thinking there needs to be a systematic approach by universities.

Autonomous learning, that is taking control of one's own learning, independently or in collaboration with others is another factor influencing success in university (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Research studies have been conducted on the views and perceptions held by students and faculty on independent learning, but these studies found that there was difficulty in them being able to define what an 'independent learner' actually is (Broad, 2006; Chan, 2001; Mistrano, 2008). The transition in moving from a highly controlled school environment to university where a student needs to be responsible for their own learning can also be one of the biggest challenges for students (Murtagh, 2010). This finding was evident in several other studies. Smith and Hopkins (2005) found that student anxiety can be heightened because they are expected to already have independent learning skills which may not have been developed when they were recipients of detailed guidance by their school teachers. These findings were supported by Leese (2010) who found a pattern between the expectation of students needing to be independent learners and the resulting anxiety they experienced. This anxiety was found to have a greater impact in the early stages of the first year in higher education (Pokorny & Pokorny, 2005). In overcoming this anxiety, Malinga-Musamba (2014) stressed how important the first-year experience is, describing it as a time when the building blocks need to be put in place in order to support independent learning and academic study. The importance of students spending an adequate amount of time studying was portrayed by Andrietti and Valesco (2015) as being more important than the need for students to attend lectures. The assertion was that more time spent studying could result in improved academic performance.

It is suggested that students don't understand the difference between what skills are required for studying at university, and how different this is to the study techniques they had adopted during their school education (Crisp et al., 2009). Fyrenius, Wirell and Silén (2007) found that students use a random mix and match approach to the study techniques they use

depending on the situation and their learning preference. In response to such concerns, recommendations have been made that universities should provide study programs during the first year so that students become more aware of the expected study practices in higher education (Haarala-Muhonen, Ruohoniemi, Parpala, Komulainen, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017). Whilst training programs can be put in place, Hodgson, Lam and Chow (2011) describe the struggle students experience in letting go of the skills set they relied on from school. Hagan and Macdonald (2000) also warn against assuming that students will eventually adapt to what is required and expected in terms of teaching and learning. A sample of first-year science undergraduates from Ulster University completed a survey at the start and again at the end of the first term. The survey examined their attitudes towards learning and expectations of university. Faculty staff expected responses to show changes in study habits as the year progressed. For example, they expected students to demonstrate more independent learning skills because they were receiving less direct staff support. Contrary to what was expected Hagan and Macdonald (2000) found that students continued to use the same study habits in university that they had developed when they were at school.

Students can also be fraught with uncertainty in terms of academic writing even though it is seen as one of the most important skills that students need in higher education (Krause, 2001). Second language or L2 learners were found to experience the most difficulty in developing this skill (Hodgson, Lam & Chow, 2011; Negari, 2012). Emirati students in the UAE are, for the large majority, L2 learners and the need to produce academic writing can compound the challenges faced as a first-year student. Al Badi (2015) suggests factors contributing to those challenges including limited prior knowledge and experience in academic writing or knowing the standard that is required from their HEI. In a US university, 69% of first year Emirati and Saudi students struggled with written assignments worrying that they did not have the correct

vocabulary or grammar (Murshidi, 2014). For some first year Emirati students, poor English language skills has made them less likely to approach their professors or to actively participate in classroom discussions (McLean, Murdoch-Eaton, & Shaban, 2013). This finding was different however to that of Emirati university students in a US context where Murshidi (2014) found that Emirati students rarely felt that native English-speaking students were more competent. In a UAE study it was also found no significant relationship between the IELTS scores of incoming undergraduates when compared to their subsequent GPA score (Garinger & Schoepp, 2013). Whilst the debate of having English as the primary language used in university, and the associated struggles for L2 learners of English, most students and half of the instructors in a UAE university still advocated English-only instruction (Wanphet & Tantawy, 2018).

2.2.5 Assessment and Feedback

Mismatches were found when comparing the opinions held by first-year students to those of their institutions when discussing *feedback and the language of assessments* (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017; Robinson, Pope & Holyoak, 2013). Feedback, it is claimed, has a significant impact on student learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017) yet it ranks lowest in terms of student satisfaction (Bell and Brooks, 2017; Blair, 2017; Burgess, Senior, & Moores, 2018; Carroll, 2014; National Students Survey Results [NSS], 2015; Williams & Kane, 2008). Professors providing feedback tend to be unaware of student dissatisfaction (Bohnacker-Bruce, 2013). In response, Hill, Manotvani, and Merrick (2010) suggest the reason for such dissatisfaction is that student expectation of feedback is different to what is actually experience.

Student reactions and responses to assessment feedback may not be what teaching staff expect. First-year students and teaching staff in a UK university completed questionnaires about

the quality and timeliness of feedback following an assessment. Robinson, Pope and Holyoak (2013) found that professors believed that the feedback they gave to students was timely and appropriate, however some students responded negatively to their feedback with few engaging in independent learning to improve their future performance. The mismatch between teacher views of their feedback compared to student views was also evidenced in a study by Mulliner and Tucker (2017) who claim that students in UK universities commonly respond negatively to feedback practices. This claim was further supported by Kandiko and Mawer (2013) who reported student concern about evaluation and feedback. The problem appears to lie in the very different views held by students and their professors between what they understand the process of good feedback to be (Li & De Luca, 2014).

Feedback from an assessment is an important stage in helping students to effectively manage their own learning (Evans, 2013) and is most effective when the feedback is personalized for each student according to the work they have done (Dawson et al., 2018; Ferguson, 2011). A research study in the UAE by Khan and Khan (2019) found that students wanted feedback to be prompt, constructive and specific to the work they done. However, it is argued that feedback still is not personalized enough (Jones, 2018). Students react very differently depending on the type of feedback they receive (Doan, 2013) and it is argued that HEIs should provide opportunities for students to learn how to interpret the type of feedback they receive (Blair & McGinty, 2013). This idea was supported by Nair, Patil and Mertova (2011) who found that students increasingly wanted their professors to track their individual progress as a means to providing them with bespoke feedback. Robinson, Pope and Holyoak (2013) suggested that student expectations of the quality of feedback are influenced by pre-university experiences. Students' preconception of their achievement level is another factor affecting their capacity to receive feedback (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2015).

Forsythe and Johnson (2017) suggest that feedback can be an emotional business and is rarely received positively by students in their first year of higher education. It was also found that if only one type of feedback was provided that students felt short-changed (Warner & Miller, 2015). Feedback preferences expressed by students varied from individual to individual with some preferring only written comments (Yang & Carless, 2013), some preferring to also have meetings with their tutors (Blair & McGinty, 2013), whilst others saw audio feedback as a viable option (Fawcett & Oldfield, 2016). Merry et al. (2013) argue that in order for feedback to be truly effective, it must include some form of discussion with the student. Students also have differing levels of emotional maturity when responding to feedback (Pitt & Norton, 2017). Their reactions to feedback can bring out positive feelings such as pride and appreciation or negative feelings such as anger and frustration (Harrison et al., 2015; Rowe, 2011; Shields, 2015; Small & Attree, 2015). They may experience difficulty when interacting with their tutor due to their own lack of confidence (Poulos & Mahony, 2008) resulting in a negative reaction to the feedback (Weaver, 2006) and a rejection of the comments they receive (Ryan & Henderson, 2018). Academic motivation is also reduced if students feel anxious about their feedback (Molloy, Borrell-Carrio, & Epstein, 2013; Nash, Crimmins & Opreescu, 2015). Positive comments however can help to foster learning and makes students more receptive to negative comments (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Liprevich & Smith, 2009; Lizzio, Wilson, Gilchrist, & Gallois, 2003).

When students have a positive and constructive experience of assessment, this can help them through the academic transition process during their first year. (Kift & Moody, 2009). Thomas et al. (2018) suggested early low-stakes assessment tasks can help identify students requiring more support and discourage them from feeling incompetent (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). Previously high attaining students may become unsettled with lower than expected grades as they grapple with understanding the new language of assessment (Beattie et al., 2019; McInnis,

James & Hartley, 2000). The style of assessment in university is very different to the assessment driven culture of school (Green, 2006). Students change the way they study when preparing for an assessment (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2008; Turner & Gibbs, 2010) when it is required for them to synthesise information and read more widely (Green, 2006). Yet this is debated by Blair (2017) who raised concerns that students struggle knowing exactly what their professor wants from them in an assessment, and due to this lack of comprehension, they struggle with the subsequent feedback. It is also argued that feedback from assessments can be limited and does not happen often enough for students (Turner & Gibbs, 2010).

Research studies of assessments taken in the first year have had three main areas of focus: the student, the assessor, and the institution. Bloxham and West (2004) suggested the best way to understand what *good* looks like is through the use of peer assessment. Hawe, Lightfoot and Dixon (2017) suggest that the use of exemplars whilst O'Donovan, Price and Rust (2004) suggest a need to enhance student understanding of assessment criteria. Saddler (2005) however argues that the difficulty experienced by students lies with the assessors rather than the student. Saddler (2005) argues that the fundamental judgments lecturers make about the quality of student work is subjective. In a further study by Saddler (2009) anomalies were found in the way assessors approached grading a task.

Other research studies suggest that the support mechanisms put in place by institutions will help students overcome the assessment challenges they experience. Morosanu, Handley and O'Donovan's (2010) exploration of student experiences in their first-year suggests they require different support mechanisms particularly at critical moments in their first-year for example during the examination period. Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011) explored not only what support should be provided but *how* it should be provided and *when*. Research studies also examine the impact of assessment on issues of retention. If the new language and methods of

assessment are too challenging the worry of academic failure can leave students feeling vulnerable and alone (McInnis, 2001). Yorke and Longden (2008) suggest that one of the main reasons for student attrition during the first year is when students struggle with the progress they are making academically. This issue was highlighted as a concern in several studies on the attrition of male Emirati students in the UAE (Abdulla & Ridge, 2011; Daleure, 2016; MOE, 2007; NAPO, 2005; Ridge, 2008, 2009).

2.2.6 Interacting with Peers and Faculty

There have been several studies of student interactions between their peers, and with faculty (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Hommes et al., 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Themes which emerged from the studies on the student-faculty relationship were the quality of their interactions, learner growth, and intellectual development. Professors make a significant impact and they therefore have a responsibility in effectively supporting students in their first year (King & Kerr, 2005). Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2006) posited that increased exposure to faculty has a positive impact of first-year student retention and persistence with their studies. Contact time with faculty provided by universities however tends to be overestimated by first-year students (Smith & Hopkins, 2005). Learner growth is said to be influenced by interactions with peers and faculty and whether students are treated as individuals (Briggs Clark & Hall, 2012). They may however experience difficulty when interacting with their tutor due to the lack of an established relationship (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). It was suggested that minimizing the social distance between a student and their tutor can build confidence in the relationship and give students confidence to seek guidance as and when they require it (Thomas, 2002). Knowing a faculty member well and developing closer working relationships is valued by students (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). The relationship can provide them with the feeling of belonging and 'being

at home' in university and this can be enhanced with faculty who are approachable (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Stephen, O'Connell, & Hall, 2008).

The student-faculty relationship is a well-known predictor of students' intellectual development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schrieder & Preckel, 2017; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Volkwein, King & Terenzini, 1986). It is also related to improved levels of interaction in the classroom and cognitive skills development (Kim & Lundberg, 2016). Students who regularly experienced positive and productive relationships with their faculty also achieved greater academic success and higher GPAs (Dika, 2012) and were more motivated to study (Trolan, Jach, Hanson, & Pascarella, 2016). A study by Kuh et al. (2006) also suggested that structuring activities to increase exposure to academics gives a positive start to first year students in their academic career. The exposure or interaction with faculty does not need to adhere only to the rigidity of a formal structured support program.

Peer interaction also has a strong bearing on how students perceive themselves as learners (Dweck & Master, 1999) and peer assisted learning and peer support can impact positively on the experience of academic transition. First-year students benefit from the positive relationships with student who take on the role of mentors (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). Tinto and Pusser (2006) promote the value of peer-assisted learning to increase academic transition during the first-year. Students can benefit from a deeper learning experience by learning from and with each other. They also feel a responsibility towards their peer which can motivate them to be more responsible for their own learning (Hodgson, Benson, & Brack, 2015). Informal peer interactions can stimulate more formal interactions, for example regarding coursework (Brouwer, Jansen, Flache, & Hofman, 2016; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Duah, Croft, and Inglis (2014) found that peer-assisted learning improved final examination results and also reduced the cooling off period where motivation starts to dip during the first year. Tariq (2005) also reported

that learning from their peers adds value to the student experience of academic transition. First year bioscience undergraduate students were placed in groups with one student acting as the peer mentor. Students worked together on numerical problems and discussed answers and difficulties with each other and their peer mentor. The overall experience was found to be positive and students expressed greater ease and freedom to ask questions and share their ideas with their peers rather than their tutor. The success of peer interactions is also illustrated in a study by Zacharopolou and Turner (2013). Undergraduate law students were found to be struggling during their first year in higher education. To address this a peer support scheme was set up for all first-year students. When the scheme was evaluated on its merits it was found that belonging to a learning community had given the students a boost in confidence and eased their experience first-year transition. The benefit of prolonged exposure to a peer mentor group was recommended in a study by Asgari and Carter (2016) who found that academic results for the mentored group were significantly higher compared to the latter. Recent studies also found an increased academic performance for first-year students who interacted with their peer mentor (DeMarinis, Beaulieu, Cull, & Abd-El-Aziz, 2017) and that peer mentoring helped the students integrate more easily into university life, and may reinforce their commitment to graduating (Yomtov, Plunket, Efrat, & Marin, 2017).

Even though successful peer mentoring points towards increased student retention, there is no 'one size fits all' strategy for its implementation with each institution applying their own version of peer support (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015). Most research of peer-assisted learning focuses on the benefits to the group, but the peer mentors should also be considered and how they experience their role. Whilst first-year students benefit from final year students acting as their mentors (Buchanan, Ljungdahl, & Maher, 2015), the strain on the mentor can often be neglected. A challenge identified by Aderibigbe, Antiado, and Sta Anna (2015) was that the time

and effort made by the mentor is rarely recognised and that this had led to difficulty in recruiting them. This was also found to be the case in a study at a private UAE university where Semiyu, Antiado and Sta Anna, (2015) found that even though peer mentoring can be beneficial, the role lacks recognition and is subject to recruitment difficulties. Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, and Wilss (2008) describe the mentor experience as being both positive and negative. Even though mentors felt that their self-esteem and confidence had improved, this was not the case for all. The pressure of being a reluctant mentor could be a cause for de-motivation, stress and anxiety. Some mentors also underestimated the amount of time it would take to prepare for the role. Peer mentors may feel the burden of responsibility to their fellow learners focusing more on their mentees learning than their own. Mentors may also feel the scrutiny of their tutor and become concerned about providing correct information in the best way.

Whilst the benefits of peer-assisted learning are often promoted, not all students take up the opportunity to work with others. Duah et al. (2014) found that, from a student perspective, learning from their peers can be deemed to be less important than learning from their academic tutors or lecturers. This resulted in less effort and less engagement in peer mentoring sessions when compared to sessions with their professor. As they are seen as less formal, some students may opt not to attend them because they are a non-compulsory part of their program. Students opting to work entirely alone on assessments rather than with their peers however were found to make less academic progress (Friedman & Mandel, 2011). The benefits of being mentored by a peer, and the resulting improvement in academic performance was found in a study by Dancer, Morrison and Tarr (2015) who identified the group making the progress on the peer mentor program was the low-achievers.

2.3 Influence of Gender on Academic Transition

2.3.1 The Gender Gap

One of the most striking features in university education in recent years is the gender gap in enrolment and graduation. Several studies have found more women enrolling in higher education and that they achieve greater academic success (Goldin, Katz & Kuzienko, 2006; Wells, Seifert & Saunders, 2013). One main reason put forward for women earning more degrees than men is their lower dropout rate (Buchmann et al., 2008). In the UAE, women also dominate the university education system in terms of enrolment (Crabtree, 2007; Gallant & Pounder, 2008; Kemp, Gitsaki, & Zaghor, 2017). Ridge (2010) suggested that the reason for this imbalance in enrolment is that Emirati men are more concerned with work than higher education (Ridge, 2010). It is claimed that the male and female students experience entering the university environment quite differently (Reay et al., 2002) indicating that gender can impact on the extent to which a student adjusts during their first year at university (Martin Jr., Swartz-Kulstad, & Madson, 1999). Males and females also reflect on their experiences in school and university differently (Hyde & McKinley, 1997). Fryer (2017) who argues that a trend widely observed is that males are at a distinct disadvantage to females when entering university due to their formal school education. Other studies found that the female advantage is because they have a better understanding of the challenges that they expect to encounter in higher education than males and can therefore more easily adjust their behavior accordingly (Cook & Leckey, 1999).

The assumption that female students outperform males at university is not universally agreed. Some research studies have shown male students outperforming females, whilst others show no difference in academic performance between male and female students. When differences have been found in academic performance the reason put forward by Arnold and Rowaan (2014) was the responses towards assessments was also different for male and female

students. In economics, it is claimed that male students perform better academically than female students (Ballard & Johnson, 2004). In contrast, in other studies, have claimed the opposite (Kindlon, 2006), with a suggestion that female students outperform males because they are more able to successfully adjust to the academic demands (Dayioglu & Turut-Asik, 2007). Swope and Schmitt (2006) however found no difference between the academic success of male and female students who were studying economics. This finding was supported in a Hong Kong study by Yau and Cheng (2014) who also found no difference between male and female students and the academic adjustment they make during their first year in higher education. When looking at the UAE context, Yousef (2019) also found there to be no difference in the academic performance of male and female students when studying statistics. Whilst contradictory findings are reported, more recent studies suggest that the gender effect has been somewhat overestimated and that it is no longer as evident as it once was (Johnson, Robson, & Taengnoi, 2014; Lindberg, Hyde, Petersen, & Linn, 2010).

2.3.2 Different Learning Expectations

The impact of gender on academic transition can also be shown through the difference in learning expectations. Women expect more from university than men (Mau & Bikos, 2000; Mello, 2008). However, several studies found that they place higher expectations on themselves and expect to perform less well than their male counterparts (Araújo, Gomes, Almeida, Núñez, 2019; Ballard & Johnson, 2004; Diniz et al., 2018). This low expectation can have a negative effect and ultimately result in poor actual performance and Diniz et al. (2018) argue that more research is needed to understand the root causes of these lower expectations as it places women at risk of difficulties during their academic transition. Students also have an expectation of what they will learn and how they will learn. When attending lectures, the informal cues shown by

lecturers perceived by male students are different to those perceived by female students (Batten, Birch, Wright, Manley, & Smith, 2014). Males rated clarity of voice and third-party reports (for example qualifications) as important. Female students rated interpersonal skills, engagement and third-party reports (qualifications) to be the influential factors. These factors form initial impressions of their lecturers, their expectations of the lectures they will attend and of future student-lecturer interactions. Student dissatisfaction can be amplified when their expectations are not met and this can be a reason for them to disconnect from their learning, potentially resulting in them changing the course they are studying or leaving higher education altogether.

2.3.3 Contrasting Attitudes Towards Learning

Research studies on male and female attitudes towards learning and assessment, and their preferred learning styles have highlighted stark differences. Studies of preferred learning styles of male and female university students revealed mixed findings. Significant differences according to gender were found in a UAE study by Choudhary, Dullo and Tandon (2011). In contrast, no significant differences were found in studies by Alkhasawneh, Mrayyan, Docherty, Alashram and Yousef (2008) and Yousef (2016, 2018) and inconsistent results in a study by Almigbal (2015). Highlighting these contradictory findings are studies by Dobson. In the first study, significant differences in learning preferences between the genders were found (Dobson, 2009), but in a later study, there were no significant differences (Dobson, 2010).

Research studies on male and female attitudes towards learning and assessment have also revealed many differences. Female students have been found to work harder (Sheard, 2009; Smith, 2004). The greater effort exerted by female students is cited as a possible reason for their degree score difference (Castagnetti & Rosti, 2009). In sharp contrast, Hodge, Wright and Bennett (2018) however found that there was no gender difference in their productivity,

perseverance and passion for studying. Female students, it is claimed, tend to be more conscientious and articulate (Francis, Read, & Melling, 2003). They are slightly more likely to have completed more background reading, to exhibit higher levels of motivation and to be less likely to miss any scheduled sessions than their male counterparts (Yorke & Longden, 2008). A UAE study however has suggested that this was not the case citing the use of technology as the determining factor. It was claimed that undergraduate UAE men have a broader knowledge of ICT than women (Doiron, 2012). However, in a recent study, it was found that Emirati students opted to rely more on digital resources than attend lectures and lessons, and that this behavior was more dominant with female students (O'Brien & Verma, 2019). Females are also more academically oriented and committed towards their studies. They express greater interest in their studies and enjoy the intellectual challenge of university more than their male counterparts (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). They spend a larger proportion of their time studying and show more commitment to successfully graduating (Downing, Chan, Downing, Kwong, & Lam, 2008; Wells, Seifert, & Saunders, 2013). Female students prefer, and benefit from, more frequent assessments than males (Myers & Myers, 2007). Their views of traditional-style assessments are more negative than male students (Furnham & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2005), and they prefer essay style assessments, projects and dissertations (Woodfield, Earl-Novell, & Solomon, 2005). Female students have a stronger response when receiving their grade and they also more receptive when receiving feedback and are more likely to act upon it (Adams, Thomas & King, 2000; Jensen & Owen, 2001).

On the other hand, male students tend to have more self-confidence even though they can often rush through their work and make unnecessary mistakes (Francis, Read, & Melling, 2003). They see themselves as having of strong leadership skills and they enjoy competition (Sax, Bryant, and Harper, 2005; Sax and Harper, 2007). They prefer summative rather than continuous

forms of assessment (Furnham & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2005) and like to be tested by multiple choice questions and oral examinations (Woodfield et al; 2005). They are also more interested in receiving a mark or grade for their work and less inclined to respond to detailed feedback (Adams, Thomas & King, 2000).

In their first year in higher education, students must adjust to the new academic demands they experience. The adjustments they make show how well they are managing the transition (Beyers & Goossens, 2002). Again, evidence of the impact of gender on managing academic transition is mixed. Abdullah, Elias, Mahyuddin and Uli (2009) found that first-year male students at a university in Malaysia adjusted to academic demands more easily than their female counterparts. The opposite however was found when looking at Korean students in the US during their first year at university (Lee, Park, & Kim, 2009). Lee et al. (2009) argued that female motivation was a key driving force behind the success of their academic adjustment. Female students struggled with the demands and obligations of traditional gender roles, family traditions and cultural expectations (López, 2014; Sax & Harper, 2007; Zeldin, Britner, and Pajares, 2008). They found their emerging role not being fully accepted and many experienced isolation and alienation from their parent culture. This experience can cause stress, but alternatively it can act as a motivator. Females students who are highly motivated and determined to succeed, as one would expect, are more likely to have a positive experience during the time they are making academic adjustments (Lee et al., 2009). It was argued by Arnold and Rowaan (2014) that even though they were not as outwardly confident than male students, they have a stronger intrinsic motivation. It is suggested that this motivation can reduce academic stress and enhance performance, and self-determination leading to successful adaptation (Chirkov et al., 2007). Female Asians exposed to western culture and gender roles such as those in Lee et al.'s study adjust better than male counterparts (Ying & Han, 2006).

2.3.4 Fear of Failure

Academic self-efficacy or being able to confidently execute a course of action for academic learning, is associated with high academic achievement and increased confidence (Afari, Ward, & Khine, 2012). Even though female students are more committed towards their studies, several research studies found them to have a lower self-efficacy compared to male students (Pajares, 2002). An explanation put forward for male students outperforming female students is that the latter may lack study confidence and therefore achieve poorer results (Byrne et al., 2012; Byrne & Flood, 2008). An alternative reason suggested was male overconfidence (Linstrom & Sharma, 2011) and higher male self-esteem making them better able to cope in university (Chow, 2010). In a UAE study of engineering students, female students rather than males were found to have lower self-efficacy (Blue, Summerville, Kirkmeyer & Johnson, 2018). This is surprising as Emirati males perform poorly compared to their female counterparts in both school and university (Ridge, 2009).

Transition to the first year can cause students a great deal of stress (Gall, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000). Gender differences have also been identified in studies on stress and anxiety. Several studies suggest female students are more likely to develop stress during their first year at university (Pomerantz, Rydell, & Saxon, 2002; Lawrence, Ashford, & Dent, 2006). They worry about poor academic performance and have a stronger fear of failing than male students (Arnold & Rowaan, 2014). They may also suffer more stress and test anxiety than their male counterparts (Chapell et al., 2005; Linstrom & Sharma, 2011) which can have a negative effect on them particularly when preparing for assessments (Surtees, Wainwright, & Pharoah, 2002; Turner & Gibbs, 2010). This argument supports findings that it is women who are much more likely than men to seek support in dealing with test anxiety and fear of failure (Bishop, Bauer, & Becker, 1998). This is also the case in the UAE (Al-Krenawi et al., 2009). In a UAE study of engineering

students, Blue et al. (2018) found that women felt more affective regret after their first exam. When female UAE students received their test results, they also tried to negotiate their score with their professor (Mynard, 2006). A possible reason for this is that they are unaccustomed to failure from their experience in school (McLoughlin, 2003). Whilst most studies suggest stress and anxiety affecting female students to a greater degree than male students, other studies have found that the stress of university life is not significantly affected by gender bias (Denovan, Dagnall, Dhingra, & Grogan, 2019).

2.3.5 Preferred Interactions

Positive interactions between faculty and undergraduate students promote more favourable educational experiences and greater academic development (Pascarella, 2006). Both males and females acquire a greater sense of degree aspiration. This claim is refuted in one study by Clifton, Perry, Roberts and Peter (2008) who found that interactions between faculty and students provide similar benefits irrespective of the student was male or female. Sax et al. (2005) suggest that when faculty and students interact, whether this is inside or outside the classroom, the interactions provide different benefits for male and female students. A case is made suggesting that male students experience more benefits from the interactions than female students (Sax et al., 2005). This idea was supported in other studies where it was found that females also find it more difficult and uncomfortable interacting with faculty (DuBois, et al., 1985; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). Some studies suggest other benefits for female students and their preferred type of interaction. When interacting with faculty, females tend to acquire a greater sense of academic wellbeing (Sax et al., 2005). They need more assistance from their faculty than male students (Smith & Zhang, 2009) and prefer to interact on an individual level with faculty rather than in a group (Cohen, 2018). In contrast, male students prefer to interact in

public or group settings and enjoy open discussions and debates about the work they are studying (Cohen, 2018).

The issue of gender and ethnicity of faculty was also raised in several studies including some in the UAE. The majority of faculty staff in the UAE are expatriates (Ridge, 2010). Some studies suggest that Emiratis could benefit from having more faculty staff from their own culture (Dickson & Le Roux, 2012) whilst others argue that ethnicity and gender are not factors for students achieving academic success in the region (Silvera & Stocker, 2018). Even though female students tend to have social interactions more often than male students and experience those interactions in a more positive way (Gibson & Lawrence, 2010; Sax et al., 2005) this principle cannot easily be applied to Emirati students in the UAE. When exploring the student-to-student interactions at universities in the UAE, it was found that some Emirati females avoid talking to male Emiratis due to the pervading cultural barrier (Al-Murshidi, 2014b). With the issue of culture in mind, the debate of allocating a peer mentor to a first-year student with the same gender and ethnicity have been explored in several other studies. Campbell and Campbell (2007) examined the one-year mentoring experience of first-year students in the US. Students were paired with a mentor according to their gender and ethnicity, class level and GPA score. Results showed that there was no advantage to having a mentor of the same gender but students with a mentor of the same ethnicity obtained higher cumulative GPA score and the group had a higher graduation rate. In a US study of engineering students, it was found that having female mentors early in the university experience led to a more positive academic experience for female students helping them to strengthen their learner identity and their study commitment (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017).

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Students experience transition as an ongoing, internal process in their mind during a time of change (Perry & Allard, 2003; Jindal-Snape, 2010). Bridges Transition Model (Bridges, 2011) describes three overlapping phases experienced by students during this transition: The Past, The Neutral Zone, and The New Beginning.

The Past	The Neutral Zone	The New Beginning
<i>Certainty</i>	<i>Ambiguity</i>	<i>Hope</i>

Figure 2.1. Adapted from *Managing Transitions*, William Bridges (2011)

During the first year of higher education, students experience many transitions that can occur simultaneously (Jindal-Snape, 2010). My research focus is on the experience of academic integration and Bridges Transition Model is the most appropriate theoretical framework for my study. The first research question asks how students are adjusting to new academic expectations at university. This meshes well with Bridges (2011) description of the first phase or ‘The Past’ or ‘Endings’. During the initial weeks at university where students experience a range of emotions related to the new course, the academic environment, and their interaction with staff. There will be constant comparisons between the familiar and the unknown. Bridges (2011) suggests that the past offers certainty and some students will hold on to their school experiences. This phase can also relate to the issue of gender particularly if a UAE student is studying at a private university. As each student experience is unique, Bridges model over overlapping phases is also appropriate as some may remain in ‘The Past’ or ‘Endings’ well beyond the first few weeks at university.

The model also meshes well with my second research question that asks about the aspects that students find most challenging

During this second phase, the Neutral Zone, students will try to adapt to their new academic situation which is still an unknown to them. They may be stressed or anxious about their academic performance, struggling with their workload and finding their student-tutor relationship to be tenuous. Assessment during the first year at university can be one of the most demanding experiences (Krause et al., 2005). It can be a reality shock when students struggle to understand the language of assessment and if their grades are lower than they hoped for or expected (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). The social interactions between students and their tutors can also increase or hinder the quality of learning (Pascarella & Terezini, 1991; Tinto, 2006-7). This is also the case for peer interactions during collaborative learning sessions.

The final phase which Bridges (2011) describes as the New Beginning, or simply Beginnings, may not be reached by some first-year students. A number may remain in the first or second phases and struggle to move beyond this stage. For those where transition is successful, they will describe their own progress confidently and talk of future (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). This final transition phase may be achieved by more male than female students supporting Harvey et al.'s (2006) claim that male and female students adjust differently and demonstrate different learning behaviours in their first year. Alternatively, there may be more students who have successfully transitioned in private than public universities. Another view is that students may be in the Beginnings phase for one area of their academic experience, say in developing new ways of learning, but could still be in the Neutral Zone or even still in the Endings phase with their experiences of assessments. Bridges (2011) model was used to explore these ideas and answer the research questions within the UAE context.

2.5 Chapter Summary

The literature review began by exploring the term transition and the different ways in which it can be conceptualised. Even though transition is of interest in many fields of enquiry, it does not have a definition that is shared universally by researchers leaving them to select what is most suitable to their research. Conceptualisations often referred to are those by Briggs et al. (2012), Ecclestone et al. (2010) and Gale and Parker (2014). Briggs et al. (2012) explores the concept of learner identity whilst Ecclestone et al. (2010) describe transition as institutional, of learner identity, as being and becoming, and as a permanent human state. Gale and Parker (2014) suggest the concepts of transition as induction and transition as development. For this study, Bridges (2011) description of transition was used and adapted to describe the term ‘academic transition’.

The second section of this chapter is a review of the literature on factors affecting academic transition. Most research stems from three contexts: the US, UK and Australia with a paucity of research found from the UAE. Academic transition can be experienced positively or negatively, and key factors impacting that experience were found from the literature: academic preparedness, learning expectations, the learning environment, learning strategies, assessment and feedback, and interactions with peers and faculty. Academic preparedness was found to be an issue that impacts on student success but there is disagreement about where the responsibility lies, whether this is with the student, their school or the university. The literature on learning expectations on the learning environment highlighted inconsistencies between the views of students in their first year and the views of their professors. The review of learning strategies illustrated the different ways of learning that are required for students to successfully transition ranging from deep learning, and critical thinking to academic writing. With the need for students to become independent learners, it was found that there is a lack of understanding of the term

itself and that students may not have a clear understanding of what and how to best learn. The importance of feedback was then discussed stressing it to be a key aspect of student dissatisfaction. The literature supports arguments put forward to improve the quality of feedback that students receive. Another factor affecting academic transition is the interactions with faculty and peers. Positive interactions between students and faculty were found to be a predictor of intellectual development whilst also strengthening the student's identity as a learner in higher education. Peer interactions and peer mentors can be motivating and help student integration but a lack of recognition for peer mentors is raised as an issue. Each of these factors was explored in this study and questions developed to determine whether claims made also reflect the experiences of first year students in higher education in the UAE.

The next section explores the influence of gender on academic transition with mixed and contradicting findings when looking at academic performance, learning expectations and adjustment to academic demands. It also found stark differences between male and females in research studies on the gender gap, attitudes towards learning, fear of failure, and preferred types of interaction. The gender gap in enrolment, attrition and academic performance was discussed highlighting a potential female advantage. Females tend to work harder than their male counterparts, are also more conscientious and more motivated to study. Yet, several studies have shown them to be more likely to suffer stress and anxiety over their academic performance, and as a result they are more likely to ask for support and guidance from faculty. Males tend to be confident and can even be overconfident diminishing their fear of failure. Studies on interactions have found that it gives students a stronger sense of learner identity with females preferring frequent one-to-one interactions and males preferring group discussions. With so many differences, Cohen (2018) suggested the need for gendered pathways in higher education. Literature from the UAE was drawn upon in this section. In exploring the experience of

transition this study examined claims that females tend to work harder than male students but that they were also more likely to become stressed over their performance in assessments. It also examined claims of male student confidence and the preferred ways in which male and female students interact.

The final section explored Bridges transition model (2011) which forms the theoretical framework for this study. This transition model was used to develop the research approach and as a lens through which to analyse the findings.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an outline of my philosophical stance and explains how this perspective influenced my choice of inquiry. It provides justification for the choice of research design, methodology and theoretical framework.

The purpose of this research study was to *explore the experiences of academic transition for Emirati students in their first year at a HEI in the UAE*. There are three research questions:

1. Which experiences do Emirati students rate as having the most impact during academic transition to HEIs in the UAE?
2. What is the impact of gender on the experience of academic transition of Emirati students in HEIs in the UAE?
3. How do student experiences of academic transition compare between public and private HEIs in the UAE?

3.1 Researcher's Paradigm - Interpretivism

When beginning my research journey, it was important to understand my paradigm and thus the approach I wanted to take with my research study. According to Bryman (2004), a paradigm can be described as the set of beliefs held by a researcher where those beliefs dictate what type of knowledge they are looking for and the processes by which they aim to collect, analyse and interpret that knowledge. The term 'paradigm' is described in different ways, for example they are described as ways of experiencing and thinking about the world, or they can be described as epistemological stances. My epistemological position is the belief system that influences how my research questions are asked and how they will then be answered. The two traditional world views or belief systems are the opposing paradigms of positivism and interpretivism (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). For my research, whilst aiming to have an in-depth

view of the experiences of academic transition of first-year Emirati students, I also looked to compare and contrast the experiences of male students and female students, and of those attending different types of HEI. I was not looking to uncover an ‘ultimate truth’. I believe that in educational settings there are numerous variables to consider, and that changes continually occur impacting experiences and social practices. As a researcher, my view is that each person constructs and interprets their own social reality, and that this view is reinforced through their interactions with other people. My attention focused on the ways in which people make sense of the world through their actions and interpretations of that world, that is I wanted to focus on how Emirati students make sense of their experience during their first year at a HEI in the UAE by exploring the participants’ experiences and perspectives. As a researcher, I am part of the world that I am investigating and therefore cannot take an objective or ‘outsider’s’ viewpoint. As such objective knowledge is not possible as the observations and experiences are subject to my own experiences and dispositions.

3.2 Researcher’s Approach – Mixed-Methods Sequential Exploratory Design

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) recommend that researchers may gain a better understanding of a phenomena being explored by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, rather than using a single method. My research problem is complex. It aims not only to explore the student experience of academic transition during their first year at university but also to determine whether this experience was influenced by gender or the type of HEI a student was attending. In order to gain a better understanding of these complexities, I used a mixed methods approach.

Qualitative inquiry resonated more closely with my beliefs, however there are also benefits to pursuing a quantitative inquiry where I can collect larger amounts of data. The

qualitative approach is often associated with the interpretivist paradigm. One example of data collection using the qualitative approach is through interviews as they can provide rich, open-ended data. Conducting interviews provides an opportunity for the Emirati students to talk about their perceptions, understanding and interpretation of the experiences they have had during their first year at university. When looking at a quantitative approach, I decided to use a survey where the data collected was in numeric form and could be used to compare and contrast responses from male and female students as well as students from public or private HEIs. I planned to utilize both qualitative and quantitative strategies, thus a mixed-methods approach because it best reflected my research strategy. There are advantages and disadvantages of using a quantitative only approach, just as there are advantages and disadvantages of using a qualitative only approach.

Many researchers argue that a mixed-methods approach can overcome the disadvantages of a single-method approach (e.g. Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene & Caracelli, 1997; Johnson & Turner, 2003; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). It is argued that by combining results from qualitative and quantitative methods, this can provide mutual confirmation of the data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Niglas 2004). Morse (2003) suggests that a mixed-methods design is beneficial to researchers when initial results are unexpected and further investigation is needed. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) also argue that by making use of both methods and by integrating the results, it is possible to provide a more complete picture of the phenomenon. The interview data I collected provided rich information that has depth, whereas the survey provided information that has breadth. The interview and survey data were collected, analysed and interpreted. In combining results from these two methods I can provide mutual confirmation of the data, making me more confident that the results are valid and reliable. If views shared by the interviewees are unexpected or are

contradictory, I am also able to investigate further through a survey. The use of a mixed-methods approach and by integrating the results thus enable me to provide a more complete picture of the student experience of academic transition, that is the phenomenon I am attempting to explain.

There are several variations of mixed method models, the *sequential exploratory design* was chosen for this research study. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) have described this type of design used specifically in situations when researchers want to explore the phenomenon in depth with a few individuals, and then to expand their findings looking for possible patterns and trends from a larger number of individuals. In my research, the qualitative phase would provide me with insight and explanations from interviewees about their first-year university student experiences of academic transition. The subsequent quantitative phase would identify statistically significant and anomalous results. It would also generalize, test or confirm results from the qualitative phase. Both phases provide me with important information that will help to address my research questions.

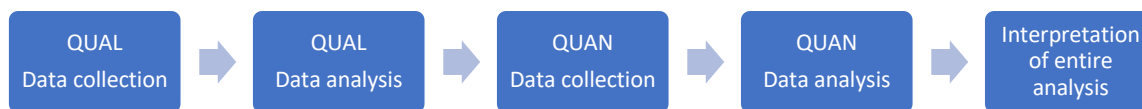


Figure 3.1. Sequential Exploratory Mixed-Methods Design (Creswell, 2015).

As seen in Figure 3.1, the mixing occurs chronologically, at the completion of the first, qualitative phase and beginning of the second quantitative phase, and also when the results from both studies were interpreted together. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) state that an advantage of the sequential QUAL→QUAN design is that due to the chronological sequence, the story unfolds in a more predictable manner, and makes it easy for a researcher to implement. The mixed methods design that I adopted in this study followed this sequence, beginning with an

initial qualitative data collection phase using in-depth semi-structured interviews. Findings from this first phase informed the questions that were used during the second, quantitative survey phase. A survey was then developed and administered with the aim of making comparisons between independent groups such as gender and the type of HEI attended. The survey data was then collected and analysed, and the two sets of results were interpreted together.

Overall, both the qualitative and quantitative phases played equally important roles in the research design. The semi-structured interviews aimed to *explore* the experiences of first-year Emirati university students and the survey aimed to *identify* differences between the experiences of male and female students and those attending each type of HEI. The methodology used in the study discussed in this chapter, beginning with ethical considerations.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Prior to any data collection, I addressed ethical considerations for my study including confidentiality and anonymity. I approached every public and private HEI in the UAE requesting ethical approval for my research but obtaining their permission was extremely challenging and over a period of 18 months, proved to be very time consuming. The request to conduct my research study was rejected immediately from some HEIs. For others, I completed the application forms and submitted them to the respective ethical research committee groups. Unfortunately, at every instance the application was rejected. I contacted individuals working at various HEIs and arranged a meeting with a Head of Faculty to present my research proposal but was told that the application would not be taken any further. Without any HEI to support my study and allow me to interview and survey their students, I consulted my thesis supervisor, and it was agreed that I should pursue a different means to invite student participation: through advertising. Approval was received from the University of Liverpool (see Appendix 1). This

involved a lengthy process of multiple submissions to the Virtual Programmes Research Ethics Committee (VPREC). Approval required the satisfactory completion of several documents (see the Appendices) including: (a) ethics application form, (b) participant information sheet, (c) participant consent form, and (d) the ethics response form. I also submitted the advertisement requests for volunteers to participate in the interview, and the invitation to complete the survey. After receiving approval from the VPREC, an advertisement was placed through various social media channels inviting students to participate in my research study. The first advertisement asked for Emirati students in their first year at a HEI in the UAE who were willing to participate in a research study and be interviewed. Students responded to the advertisement via email. For those responding to the interview request, they were sent the participant information sheet in advance of the interview and were asked to confirm that they had understood the information before agreeing to be interviewed. They were also given the opportunity to ask any questions that they might have about their participation. The second advertisement asked for Emirati students in their first year at a HEI in the UAE to participate in a research study by completing a survey. Those responding to the survey had the participant information provided at the beginning of the survey, requiring a 'yes' click to begin answering questions. Participants wishing to contact someone regarding the research study were provided with contact details for the researcher, thesis supervisor, and the University of Liverpool ethics department.

3.4 Phase 1: Qualitative Data

3.4.1 Pilot Study

Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003) suggest researchers should ensure that interview questions are sufficiently flexible, and semi-structured to provide interviewees the opportunity to expand on their answers. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) found this to be a commonly used

approach by researchers when collecting qualitative data. It is the same approach that I adopted when designing my interview questions, making them semi-structured to allow for in-depth responses. As the interview was only to be conducted once with each participant, the questions were used as a guide to explore the academic experiences through the phases of transition. For optimum interview time, the guide served a useful purpose of systematically and comprehensively collecting participant views as well as keeping to the focus of the interview.

When constructing the interview questions, I had a number of areas to be addressed and aimed to develop questions that were sufficiently flexible in nature to allow the freedom to probe when appropriate. The topics I included were guided by my main research questions, and I broke these down into different questions that were relevant and understandable. With the purpose of exploring the experiences of academic transition for Emirati students in their first year at a HEI in the UAE, I also referred to the main topics and issues that emerged from the literature review. The areas to be addressed in the interview were the student experiences of the new learning environment, experiences of changes in learning expectations, and experiences of the changes in assessment. The questions followed an order that could reflect the stages of exposure that a university student would experience during their first year. Initially, their experiences and impressions of the learning environment, for example, the campus size, not knowing people, or being in a mixed-gender environment. This would follow with experiences of learning expectations in higher education and how they differed from school. Finally, students would reach a stage in their first year when they are required to take assessments. To help the conversation flow naturally, the interview questions had an introduction, middle and end. The final questions were designed to explore which experiences first-year students had found to be the most changing or the most enjoyable, as a form of reflection. This was followed with a wrap-up question where interviewees were given the opportunity to add or elaborate to their narrative.

I wanted the interview to be conversation with a purpose, so within the pre-determined set of open-ended questions, I also wanted to provide the opportunity to explore any particular responses further. I therefore included probes to help guide the conversation and stimulate the interview if I thought the interviewee had more to say. For example, if in response to a question about assessments is, “I take my assessments much more seriously now than when I was in school”, I might ask, “Can you give me an example of how you prepare for assessments now that you’re in university?”. I also used probes if I thought an interviewee had provided a non-answer, or if they had not understood the question.

Many researchers argue that the interview protocol requires careful examination. Reasons provided include: the need for a clear structure, length, writing style and comprehension (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015); clarity, simplicity and answerability (Maxwell, 2013); to ensure the questions follow a logical order (Merriam, 2009); and to ascertain whether the interviewee’s understanding of each question is close to what is intended or expected (Patton, 2015). Some of these points, I could address myself but for others, a lone researcher may not be able to pick up. It was therefore important for me to receive feedback on my interview guide. It went through several redesigns following feedback from colleagues, and from the pilot interview. The pilot interview was conducted to assess whether each question gave adequate opportunity for a range of answers and to gauge an approximate time commitment. It was conducted with an Emirati student who had recently started their second year at university in the UAE. They had recent memories of their experiences as a first-year student, and their responses gave some indication of what might be expected during the qualitative phase of data collection. The student also provided me with feedback when questions were unclear or needed rewording, or if there was repetition with the questions that were being asked. The final interview protocol including the probing questions can be found in Appendix 2.

3.4.2 Sampling and Recruitment

I wanted to explore the experiences of male and female Emirati students in their first year at private and at public HEIs in the UAE. When choosing the sample size, it needed to be large enough to provide sufficient data to address the research question, but not too large that collection and analysis was overly time consuming. For phenomenological research, there is no definitive sample size. Creswell and Miller (2000) recommend a sample of 5-25, whereas Morse (1994) recommends at least six. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that the concept of saturation should be adopted whereby no additional information can be gleaned by adding another participant to the sample. Taking these recommendations into consideration, I arrived at a reasonable sample size of 20 for the total number of interviewees to take part in my study. The criteria for selection were that the student must be in their first year of their undergraduate course at a HEI in the UAE, they must be Emirati, and that they had a sufficiently good level of English (IELTS level 5.5). The breakdown is listed in Table 3.1. The sample of 20 interviewees consisted of those responding to the first advertisement. As described in Section 3.3, all participants who responded to the first advertisement and were interviewed were also invited to participate in the survey. To maintain anonymity, interviewees were designated pseudonyms.

Table 3.1

Breakdown of Interviewees

	Type of HEI		Total
	Public	Private	
Male	5	5	10
Female	5	5	10
Total	10	10	20

3.4.3 Qualitative Data Collection

The scheduling of interviews was arranged at mutually agreed times. All interviews took place in a private study room at each interviewee's place of study and were conducted face-to-face. The interviews lasted between 25 and 55 minutes with a total of 766 minutes of data that was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcribing was verbatim and was done almost immediately after the interview had taken place. Throughout the interviews, the questions focused on how students had experienced changes to their learning environment, changes in learning expectations and changes in assessment: how they understood those changes; the extent to which they engaged with those changes and how they were developing as learners. The transcripts were given to interviewees via email for their feedback and to ensure validity. The initial data analysis was started almost simultaneously, a step recommended in Silverman (2016).

3.4.4 Qualitative Data Analysis

Once all the transcribed interviews were validated by the interviewees, I began my data analysis. This was iterative in nature as I moved between the research questions, theoretical framework, and the literature to interrogate the data. Each interview that had been transcribed was saved in NVivo © where the data was managed and thematically analysed. This analysis was aligned to the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006) involving six phases of coding: (1) familiarization, (2) creating initial codes, (3) looking through the data for themes, (4) continually revisiting those themes, (5) clearly defining those themes, and (6) presenting the findings.

I was interested in the students' own accounts of their experiences and points of view; this determined the interview questions and analysis. A combination of inductive and deductive coding was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the analysis process being iterative and reflexive.

In a bottom-up or inductive approach, the coding and theme development is directed by the data without trying to fit it into any pre-existing framework, that is the themes emerge from the data. However, through the process of coding, I would be reflecting my own standpoint and cannot free myself from my ontological and epistemological assumptions. The literature review had also highlighted key areas of interest with regard to the experience of academic transition for first year students in higher education, for example assessment. As such, there were pre-existing concepts and ideas to consider when interrogating the data. A deductive approach is coding and theme development directed by existing concepts and ideas, such as those that were found from the literature review, *priori codes*. Hence the approach I adopted was an inductive-deductive combination as I conducted my thematic analysis. Open-codes were developed alongside *priori* codes, those codes were modified, and themes emerged from the data as it was interrogated and revisited.

In order to effectively use the inductive-deductive approach, it was important to be familiar with the data and the literature. This was done by making notes and jotting down early impressions. An example of this was the sense of pride shown by students when talking about the future vision of the UAE. Coding was used to reduce large amounts of data into smaller chunks of meaning, and line-by-line open coding was used where the codes could be developed and modified as I worked through the coding process. An example of how I worked through the coding stage is described and shown in Table 3.2. Students wanted to discuss experiences of one-to-one interactions with the professors. This kept coming up during the interviews and was relevant to the research. Each transcript was coded separately where segments of text relevant to one-to-one interactions with professors were selected. Each segment was then coded to describe what was discussed during that interaction. Examples include lecturers providing students with individual feedback on assignments, lecturers providing students with words of encouragement

and motivation, lecturers providing guidance on how to approach a new task by using assessment criteria, and so on. The codes were compared and modified before moving on to other transcripts. As this process continued, new codes were generated, and existing ones were modified.

Each theme captured something interesting about the data and was characterized by its significance. Initially there were several cycles of coding and identifying preliminary themes. Codes were again examined to see if they fitted together into a theme. For example, there were several codes related to experiences of being Emirati, experiences of being male or female, and of peer work. These were collated into an initial theme called *Working with others*. During this stage, the codes had been arranged into broader themes. Most codes were associated with one theme, but some were associated with more than one. For example, lecturers providing assessment feedback had been coded in theme 2: *Faculty influence on the student experience* and theme 3: *Assessment*. At this stage, data was revisited to make sure it supported each theme and there were no overlaps.

Themes which appeared within main themes were identified. For example, in the theme of assessment, there were three emergent subthemes. The perception of exam anxiety was different to the way in students described their experiences of exam preparation, and different again to their experiences of receiving marks and comments from previous assessment tasks. This created a main theme of *Assessment* with subthemes of *assessment anxiety*, *exam preparation* and the *value of marks and comment*. The themes and subthemes are shown in Table 3.2. A short, worked example of how the thematic analysis was undertaken can be found in Appendix 5.

Table 3.2

Distribution of Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Institutional attachment	Learning expectations
Faculty influence on the student experience	Different teaching style
	Impact of feedback
	Academic advising
Assessment	Assessment anxiety
	Exam preparation
	Value of comments and marks
Learner identity	Adjusting to academic demands
	Skills development
	Adopting a new learning stance
	New attitude towards learning
	More confident orientation
Benefits and drawbacks of working with others	Collegiality
	Culture matters more than gender
	UAE vision and future workplace

3.5 Phase 2: Quantitative Data

3.5.1 Developing the Survey

When developing the survey, I began by looking at instruments which had already been used in previous research studies to understand the first-year student's university experience, with an aim to either use or adapt an instrument to contribute to my research study. I also used information from the qualitative phase to guide my choice of survey scales. During the first-year journey, students described the *initial concerns* they had in the first few weeks of starting university. They shared their experiences of *teaching*, the importance of having a good professor and how this helped them to understand the *learning expectations*. They described the quality of academic advising they received, focusing especially around the time of *assessments*. They described the experiences of *interactions with peers*; in group tasks, when studying together, working with friends or new people, and working with those of a different gender. Interviewees also shared examples of how their *study skills* and *study habits* were changing as a result of being

a university student with *graduate qualities*, rather than a school pupil. Nested within their examples, they discussed other forms of academic support they were using. As their journey was described, they shared the *challenges* they had experienced, and when reflecting on their first-year thus far, they offered many examples of the areas in which they felt there had been *successes*. The two instruments that most closely aligned with the information I wanted to investigate were the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and a survey used in Lowe and Cook's (2003) 'Mind the Gap' research study. The survey developed was an adaptation of the CEQ and Lowe and Cook's (2003) instrument. When constructing the survey, I returned to the main research questions: exploring the experience of academic transition, the impact of gender on this experience, and the impact of the type of HEI attended on this experience. Alongside these questions, I reviewed information from the qualitative phase. Data from the interviews had provided me with rich information about Emirati student experiences of academic transition in their first year in a HEI in the UAE. The major themes that emerged from the data mirrored many of those already found in the literature review. The data also provided me with some new lines of inquiry such as working with peers who were a different gender, working with other Emiratis, and attitudes towards the UAE vision. In order to understand and compare experiences between male and female Emirati students and between those attending public HEIs or private HEIs, single-scale items were included to provide demographic information. The survey was then created with a beginning, middle and end using a similar approach to the interview questions. Following initial demographic items, multi-scale items included questions about initial concerns, course experiences, challenges and successes.

3.5.2 Single-Scale Items

The single-scale items were to collect demographic data including gender, confirmation they were Emirati, confirmation that they were in their first-year at a HEI, the type of HEI currently attended (public or private), the major being studied, and the type of school previously attended (public or private). I also included items about study habits such as whether they had a private tutor, the number of hours they were studying per week, and the impact they feel that national service has had on self-regulation. These questions were added following analysis of the interview data.

3.5.3 Multi-Scale Items

I included 5 statements to ascertain the initial concerns students felt, for example “making presentations” or doing well in assessments” where they evaluate the level of concern using a 5-point Likert scale. I also used 6 statements to ascertain which challenges students felt impacted them in a bigger way. Examples include “the amount of information I have to cope with for my studies” and “the level of difficulty of my course”. I also used 16 statements to ascertain views of the course experience in scales such as teaching, for example “my professor explains things really well” and “the staff put time and effort into giving written comments about my work’. The full list of questions after further refinement are in Appendix 6.

3.5.4 Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Following the process of writing and rewriting the survey questions, a final set of 44 items were to be tested during this phase of the study. The questions were assembled into a single questionnaire. Students were asked to select their response to each question using a 5-point Likert scale where choices ranged from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. The

questionnaire was advertised online where a link could be found to Survey Monkey©. There was a three-week window available for students to complete the survey. A total 412 were completed with 377 surveys that were usable. The 35 surveys that were rejected consisted of 6 where the respondents were not Emirati, and a further 29 who were Emirati university students but not in their first year of study. Following some preliminary analysis using Survey Monkey©, I used SPSS© version 25.0 to conduct descriptive analysis such as mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis. More advanced analysis was then carried out using inferential statistics for non-parametric tests, specifically the Mann-Whitney U-test was used to compare differences between distributions.

In attempting to compare the impact of gender and the type of HEI attended on the experience of academic transition, analysis was used to compare distributions of the independent samples. A Shapiro-Wilks normality test indicated the need to conduct non-parametric tests. In the analysis, gender and type of HEI were each, in turn, set as split cases where Mann-Whitney U-tests were conducted using SPSS©. The tests identified significant differences between the distributions for male and for female students for each question. The tests also identified significant differences between the distributions for private and for public HEIs. The results helped to form a more complete picture of what individual students and groups of students were experiencing during their first year in higher education.

3.6 Integration of Results and Interpretations of Data Analysis

With the aim of providing as complete a picture as possible of the student experience of academic transition, the next stage was to integrate the results and interpret the analysis. By merging the results, the data became interdependent in addressing the research questions, and produced a whole that was greater than a sum of each qualitative and quantitative part. By

presenting the data simultaneously, I aimed to provide insight into each aspect or theme of the student experience of academic transition. The integration allowed me to elaborate on a theme and give more complete explanations. The technique involved taking one theme at a time, displaying results and analysis from the interviews and surveys and placing them side by side. This merging process was also used to try and triangulate the data (O’Cathain, Murphy, & Nicholl, 2010). By taking one theme at a time, I looked for findings in the two sets of results that converged, complemented, and/or contradicted. With findings that were convergent, for example if the majority of students had very similar views on their experiences of the quality of teaching, then this could provide practical knowledge that could be used to support, strengthen and improve the future teaching of first-year university students. For example, when the qualitative and quantitative data was analysed, a theme that emerged was the student experience of a new style of teaching and learning. This was further investigated through the questionnaire when students were asked if they *liked the way their professor teaches* and if *it had been challenging adapting to the new style of teaching*. When presenting results from the study, integrating the qualitative and quantitative data enabled me to interpret my findings on this theme, including the statistics-by-theme, thus providing a more complete picture when addressing my research questions. This approach was repeated through the review and interpretation of the data that had been analysed. If the findings were complementary, for example if both male and female students had seen an improvement in their study skills but that the skills were different for each gender, this information could provide institutions with knowledge about more gender specific academic support for first-year students. If the findings were contradictory, this would imply differences in individual and group experiences, for example when working with classmates of a different gender. With these features in mind, this study aimed to provide reliable and valid answers in response to the research questions that were being asked. The process of integrating

the qualitative and quantitative data was recursive until I reached an end result. The combined results under each theme helped to elaborate, enhance and extend upon my findings to give a more complete story than if I had presented each set of results alone.

3.7 Chapter Summary

Taking into account the scope of this research study, an exploratory sequential mixed methods design was adopted in order to collect, analyse and interpret the data. For the initial qualitative component, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were completed of 20 Emirati students who were in their first year at a HEI in the UAE. Following thematic analysis of the qualitative data, a survey was designed and subsequently administered to 377 respondents who were Emirati students in their first year at a university in the UAE. Following analysis of the survey data, both sets of analysis were integrated, and have been presented in the findings and analysis chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter integrates findings from the interviews with 20 first year Emirati students together with the findings from the survey of 377 first-year Emirati respondents all of whom are in their first year at a HEI in the UAE. A summary of the qualitative data collection and analysis phase illustrates how the findings were fed into the design of the quantitative data collection phase. The application of Bridges transition model (2011) is also discussed. The integrated findings from both phases are then presented beginning with an overview of the demographic data collected, shown in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. This is followed with the integrated findings and analysis from both phases detailing five main themes: prior institutional attachment, faculty influence, assessment, learner identity, and the benefits and drawbacks of peer interactions. This section is followed by a discussion based on the key findings. In the conclusion of this chapter, a summary of the key themes and new findings are presented.

4.1 Summary of Qualitative Findings

The first phase of data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews. The questions used can be found in Appendix 2. Students described their perceptions and experiences, including the challenges they encountered and successes they enjoyed during their first year at university. A particular focus was placed on the learning environment, learning expectations and assessment. These areas of focus were taken from key items that had been highlighted from the literature review. The questions allowed students to expand on their responses with regard to these key areas and describe particular experiences that they felt had impacted on their overall first-year experience. Analysis from the qualitative data collection phase resulted in five major themes and several sub-themes of the first-year student experience. Bridges transition model (2011) was also used to try and identify and group themes and sub-

themes relating to *endings*, the *neutral zone*, and *beginnings*. Findings from this first phase were then used when designing the second data collection stage, which was the quantitative phase. The five emergent themes from the qualitative phase were: challenges and looking back, the faculty, the learner, peers, and successes and looking forward.

4.1.1 Theme 1: Challenges and Looking Back

All interviewees made comparisons between their experiences of university to their previous experiences of school. The majority of the interviewees, but not all, described their initial concerns and struggles as they tried to adjust and adapt to the new learning environment and understand the institution's learning expectations. Responses tended to begin with students describing their school experience positively and ended with a less positive description of their university experience. Frustration appeared to arise because students struggled to comprehend what the university expected of them and this experience led to confusion. Attachment to their prior institution featured more strongly when students described the experiences that they had during the first few weeks. Survey questions were developed to explore this further and find out more about what their particular concerns were in those first few weeks, what aspects they found the most challenging initially, whether all students shared the same concerns, and to what extent.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Faculty

Whilst comparisons continued to be made between school and university, student described their experiences with individual professors who had made a significant impact, whether this was positive or negative. Their descriptions related to experiences of understanding what professors expected of them, their teaching styles, how different these styles were compared to school, and the out-of-class support that was provided to improve their

understanding of a topic. Many responses centred on assessment and how they felt about the feedback they received after an assessment. Again, what featured strongly was that students were struggling with the university's style of assessment, and comparisons were made to the more favourable experience they had of school assessments. They tended to link their experience of university assessments alongside the quality of feedback they received and whether they felt supported by their professor. To explore this further, survey questions were developed to determine which areas made a greater impact on the student experience, whether this was teaching, assessments, feedback, or the support they received from faculty.

4.1.3 Theme 3: The Learner

Students described how their approaches to learning were changing during their first year. Whilst some described how they had a better idea of notetaking during lectures, others described the changes they had started to make in developing different learning strategies and study habits. Some interviewees were studying more often and for longer than they did in school, but others had said that there was no real difference. They also described their understanding of the difference between 'gaining knowledge' and 'understanding', and their struggles in making that transition. Whilst some students were starting to become more responsible for their own learning, others relied on having a private tutor and only studied out of university when the tutor was with them. Survey questions were developed to further explore which learning strategies and study skills students felt had been the most challenging, which they felt more confident with, and to what extent their study habits had changed since school.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Peers

There were mixed responses when students responded to questions about their experiences of working with their peers. The responses tended to be more favourable from male interviewees than from female interviewees when they described their experiences of giving joint presentations and conducting group work. Female interviewees tried to explain some of the tensions that occurred during group work activities by making comparisons between peers who had previously attended public schools to those who had previously attended private schools. Another factor that was highlighted by students was working specifically with Emiratis of the opposite gender. Whilst working with the opposite gender per se did not seem to pose much of an issue, the male Emirati interviewees were respectfully cautious and hesitant when having to interact with female Emiratis. In contrast, female Emiratis did not see this as a barrier and after the initial awkwardness, they expressed confidence in being able to work with fellow male Emiratis. The impact and influence that culture and gender have on the first-year experience was explored further in the survey. This was in addition to asking students about initial concerns they may have had about working with people they did not know, and how their experience changed over the course of their first year.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Successes and Looking Forward

When students were asked to reflect on their overall experiences during the first year, their responses were mixed. Some students talked confidently about how they could now manage their time more effectively, that they were putting in more effort, and taking their studies much more seriously than they did when they were at school. Other successes included students describing ways in which their study methods had changed and even though they were spending more time studying, they put this down to feeling passionate about the subject they were

learning. Some students however, described the pressure they still felt in dealing with an unmanageable workload, the difficulty in performing well in assessments, and the challenges they still faced with faculty or peers. There was also an air of looking forward and beyond university which reflects the awareness Emiratis have about the UAE vision and their commitment to it. Male and female interviewees talked about the importance of succeeding at university so that they could contribute to the UAE nation. Since the aim of this study was to explore how students experienced academic transition, survey questions were also designed to determine the extent to which students perceived their academic successes.

4.2 Using Bridges Transition Model

Findings from the qualitative data collection stage were fed into the survey design. Bridges transition model was also used as a guide in designing the survey with questions related to *endings*, the *neutral zone*, and to *beginnings*. The survey consisted of 44 questions and can be found in Appendix 6. Bridges (2011) described *endings* as an individual's experience of letting go which can be triggered by a sense of loss. Internal responses to endings may include sadness, regret, disorientation, isolation, anxiety, confusion or frustration. Themes 1, 2, 3 and 4 provided examples of the academic challenges that students were experiencing and their tendency to look back and reminisce about their school experiences. In order to explore this further, questions 8-13 were designed to ask students about their initial academic concerns and questions 33-38 to ask which academic experiences students found to be the most challenging. The *neutral zone* is a time of flux hovering between the past and the new where students are still attached to their endings but where they acknowledge their new situation. They may not be settled with the academic changes but will be trying to adapt to them. Examples of student experiences in the neutral zone were found across all themes and sub-themes but to varying extents. This finding

supports the argument that every individual will experience the process of transition at their own pace (Bridges, 2011). In order to further explore experiences of faculty, developing as a learner and working with peers, questions 14-32 were included in the survey. The phase of *beginnings* has been described as a time when students have embraced the academic changes experienced during their first year. Bridges (2011) describes this as being a time when an individual has purpose and a plan. Themes 3, 4 and 5 included examples of some students emerging from the neutral zone. To explore this further, questions 39-44 were included in the survey to determine which academic areas students felt they had been successful.

4.3 Integrated Findings and Analysis

On completion of the survey, findings were analysed. There were 377 responses from male and female Emirati students in their first-year at a HEI in the UAE. This included those from public and private HEIs and across a variety of undergraduate courses. The following section presents the integrated findings and analysis from both the qualitative and quantitative phases.

4.3.1 Demographic Data

Table 4.1 Pseudonyms for interviewees

Student Pseudonym	Gender	Type of HEI attended
Dahab	Female	Private
Elham	Female	Private
Farah	Female	Private
Iman	Female	Private
Khadija	Female	Private
Layla	Female	Public
Malika	Female	Public
Saffron	Female	Public
Salma	Female	Public
Zahra	Female	Public
Fahd	Male	Private
Issa	Male	Private
Bassam	Male	Private
Asad	Male	Private
Haidar	Male	Private
Junaid	Male	Public
Karim	Male	Public
Latif	Male	Public
Musa	Male	Public
Uthman	Male	Public

Table 4.2 Respondent Numbers

	Type of HEI					
	Public		Private		Total (N)	
		%		%		%
Male	51	14	30	8	81	22
Female	227	60	69	18	296	78
Total (N)	278	74	99	26	377	100

Table 4.3 Major being studied at the Higher Education Institution

Major	Total	%
Applied languages	11	3
Business & Economics	73	19
Education	4	1
Engineering	100	27
Food & Agriculture	5	1
Humanities & Social Sciences	66	18
IT	62	16
Law	14	4
Medicine	19	5
Sciences	23	6
Total	377	100

4.3.2 Theme 1: Prior Institutional Attachment

Most interviewees described the most challenging period of their first year was during the first few weeks of starting university where they were still holding on to the familiarity and routines during their recent school experience. The interviewees recognised that their challenges were a combination of initial concerns and the unclear expectations they had of the higher education experience. According to Bridges Transition Model, descriptions of student experiences particularly during the first few weeks at university could be classified as items within the endings phase: familiar routines were gone (loss), sources of information or support were confusing (disorientation), and a sense of belonging was lacking (isolation). One-third of the interviewees believed that being in an environment where so many things are unfamiliar can result in an undesirable start to their experience of higher education. For example, a student described how their initial experience felt disorienting due to the sudden exposure to a new learning environment.

Sometimes you are sitting next to a person that you never met in your life and it feels so weird...you're studying new things, you're having a new teacher, you're having new class mates and you're in a new place.... you don't feel like you belong. (Zahra)

This quotation clearly shows that not only were the sudden changes in familiar routines and experiences a concern, but also that students can perceive university as an alien environment. This suggests that as students begin to feel as if they belong to the university, they may gradually become more accustomed to their environment and the learning expectations and thereby experience a less stressful academic transition. Similarly, an interviewee emphasized the

importance of having faculty who cared about them and helped them in understanding the course.

In school, teachers would explain anything we didn't understand, and they would go through it again and again and again until everyone understands it but here, you're on your own. I wish the professors were more like my teachers. (Malika)

What this student implied was that teachers at school cared more about their students' learning experience, but that professors expected them to take more responsibility for their own learning at university. Half of the interviewees expressed similar experiences of the loss they felt in leaving school behind and the feeling of isolation at university where they no longer had anyone to take care of them. The school routines that had been followed for years had now disappeared resulting a destabilizing effect and the desire to return to their once familiar school setting. Nearly all the interviewees, described their school experience as more positive than their initial experience of higher education which further confirms the argument that institutional attachment can affect the initial experience of academic transition to university.

4.3.3 Theme 2: Faculty Influence on the Student Experience

The influence of faculty emerged as a theme as students described their experiences of trying to make sense of how the university expected them to behave and to learn, of adapting to a new lecture approach to teaching, of receiving feedback for tasks they had completed, and in seeking support through academic advising.

Learning Expectations

Although statements from interviewees reflected mixed views about the extent to which learning expectations were made clear to them by faculty, the majority of students surveyed agreed that staff did make expectations clear. Half of the interviewees expressed frustration and uncertainty when it came to them understanding what was expected. For example, an interviewee argued that expectations were not made explicit and students needed to elicit their own ideas of what to do.

They have a specific program they are following but I'm not aware of what that program is, so I don't know what we are going to be learning next. It was frustrating. It took days for me to know what to do because he didn't tell us what the idea was, we just had to figure it out. (Fahd)

This quotation supports several studies that have shown that students have difficulty knowing what to expect at university (Blair, 2017; Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Crisp et al., 2009; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). It also suggests that it is the responsibility of each student to own their learning rather than relying on the information being explicitly provided by their professor. A contrasting experience was expressed by half of interviewees who described what information was provided, how and when it could be accessed, and confidence in knowing how to use it.

Some teachers put everything that we are going to study throughout the whole semester, they'll upload everything, and some will teach and then upload. It's straightforward so we know what to do and when. (Malika)

Survey results showed that both male and female students, on the whole, felt that staff made it clear from the start about their expectations. The results appear to indicate views that are fairly similar overall (Figure 4.1) but with a statistically significant difference indicated between male and female students studying at private HEIs. A majority of male (78%) and female students (75%) agreed (*strongly agreed* or *agreed*) with the statement that staff made expectations clear from the start. A Mann-Whitney *U* test found that a significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (80% of which 40% *strongly agreed*) felt that expectations were made clear in comparison to female students in private HEIs (74% of which 17% *strongly agreed*) ($z = -1.968, p < .05$).

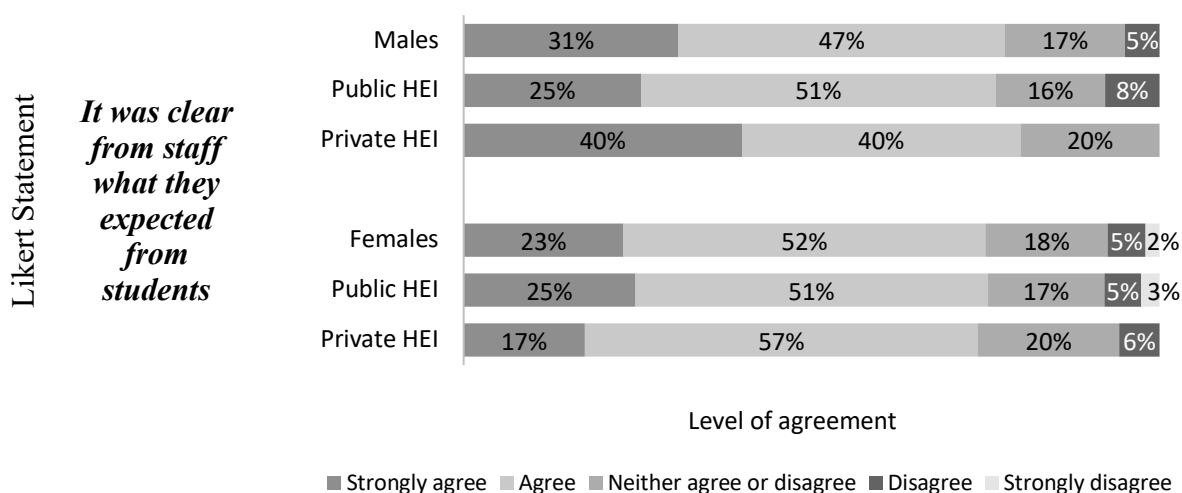


Figure 4.1. Perceptions concerning Learning Expectations

What these findings imply is that although the majority of students who were surveyed agreed that learning expectations were shared by their professors, students had different experiences of how this was done. Interviewees spoke about individual professors who had made an impact on them (positive or negative), and it was the experience they had with this particular professor that was at the forefront dominating their overall experience. Analysis of the survey data found a significant difference when comparing the experiences of male and female students

in private HEIs; a pattern which appears across each of the major themes. This raises more questions. Male and female students study together in private HEIs and would therefore have the same professors if they are on the same course. If a professor is sharing learning expectations with their students, they would be doing so to male and female students simultaneously. This does not explain why significantly more male than female students agreeing that learning expectations are shared. A possible response is that male and female students have different expectations of what should be shared and how it should be shared. The argument presented here is supported by those studies suggesting that women have higher expectations regarding university than their male counterparts (Mau & Bikos, 2000; Mello, 2008).

A Different Teaching Style

When asked about the teaching style used at university, eleven of the interviewees described it as lecturing and didactic in nature. Comparisons between the teaching styles used in school and those in university were made suggesting that prior institutional attachment still existed. For example, an interviewee returned to the concept of school providing them with the information needed, but they also recognised that at university, they needed to take their own notes.

At university, the professor concentrates more only on speaking and PowerPoint, they throw the information at you and leave....in school we had everything written down on the Smartboard for us. Now we have to do it all ourselves.

(Saffron)

This quotation supports the view of Kandiko and Mawer (2013) who claimed that students felt that their lecturers just read off the slides. It also suggests a difference between the teaching styles used by teachers in school and the styles used by professors. This difference could explain why some students felt unprepared for the new teaching style used at university (Lowe & Cook, 2003) and therefore found it challenging. The student experience of teaching in university drew criticism from two-thirds of interviewees, ranging from “Nobody understood what the professor was saying” (Junaid), to “The professors talk so fast that I just couldn’t keep up” (Issa).

In the survey, students were asked if they liked the way their professor teaches and also if they found it challenging adapting to that teaching style. The results for liking the teaching style appear to indicate fairly similar views, with a statistically significant difference again indicated between male and female students studying at private HEIs (Figure 4.2). A majority of male (72%) and female students (66%) agreed (*strongly agreed* or *agreed*) with the statement that they liked the way their professor teaches. A Mann-Whitney *U* test found that a significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (77% of which 27% *strongly agreed*) felt that the teaching was good in comparison to female students in private HEIs (61% of which 12% *strongly agreed*) ($z = -1.983, p < .05$).

The results also show that even though male and female students attend lectures together in private HEIs, significantly more male students (77%) than female students (61%) like the way their professor teaches. One reason for this outcome could be that first-year students are still attached to, and more accustomed to the teaching they experienced at school. In comparing their school experience to their university experience, more male than female students may view the university teaching style superior. A second reason could be the impression the lecturer has on

their students, and how this compares to their teacher/s from school. Batten et al. (2014) found female students rated interpersonal skills and engagement to be influential factors during lectures, whereas these characteristics were not identified by male students. This would indicate that it is the female students in private HEIs who do engage with their lectures in the same way as their male counterparts, or that they are comparing their lecturer to the teacher/s with whom they have developed a familiar relationship during their years at school.

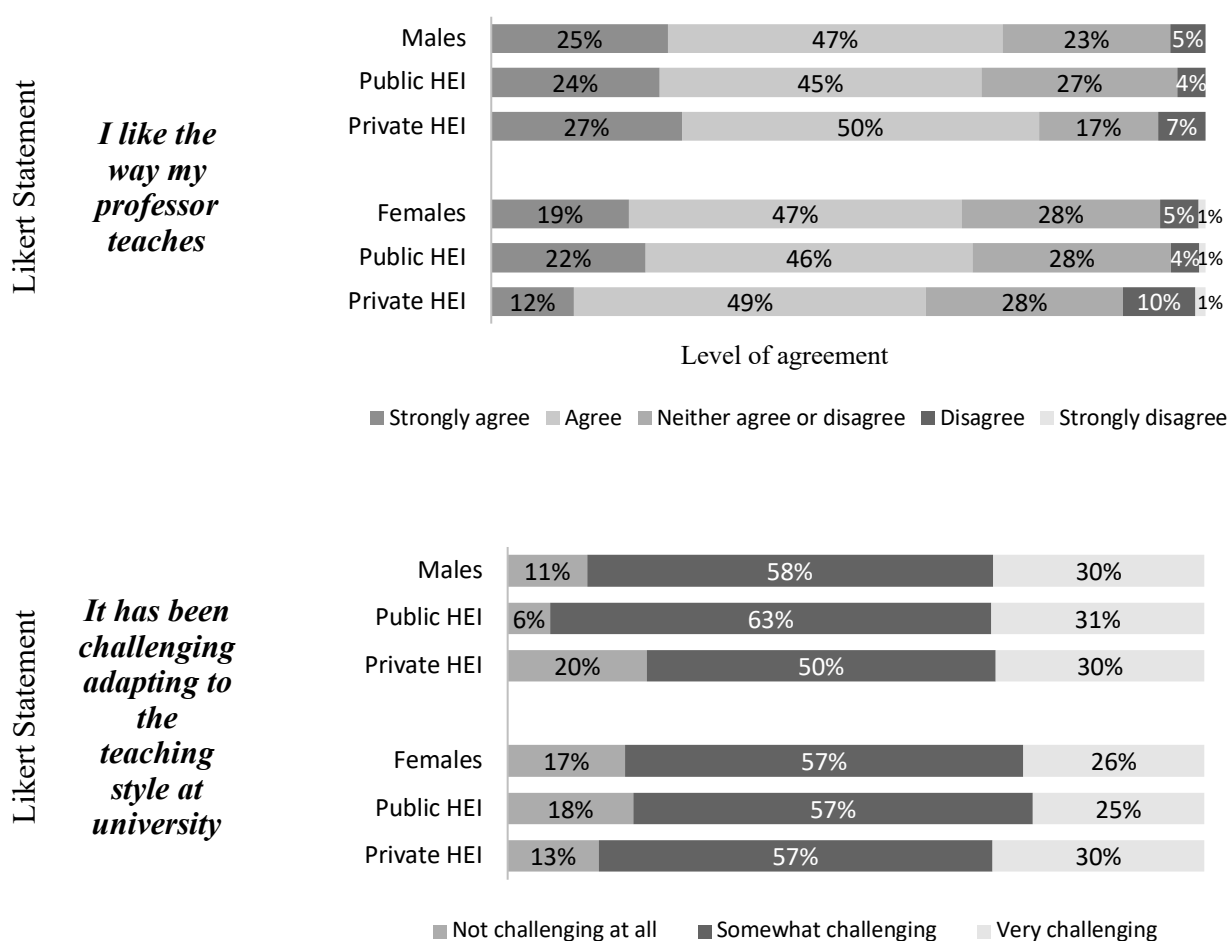


Figure 4.2. Perceptions concerning University Teaching Styles

When asked whether they found it a challenging experience trying to adapt to their professor's teaching style, the results appear to indicate fairly similar views (Figure 4.2) with

male (30%) and female students (26%) finding it to be very challenging. These results suggest that even though the majority of male and female students like the way their professor teaches, it has been a challenge for them adapting to the teaching style at university.

Findings from this section, again suggest that male and female students have different expectations and perceptions of what university teaching entails. Results from a UAE student satisfaction survey conducted by Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2013) indicated that students want good quality teaching but suggest that male and female students have different views of what constitutes good quality teaching. Expectations of what good teaching looks are likely to have developed from school experiences. This points to male and female students experiencing different teaching styles during their high school education.

Impact of Feedback

The majority of interviewees described the experience of receiving support from professors at university as daunting and emotional, and often reverted to a comparison between school and university. An interviewee explained it would be easier if they had continued to receive the step-by-step guidance that they were accustomed to experiencing in school.

I thought it would have been the same as school you know. But this professor, he didn't give us any idea about what he wants, what he needsI would have liked his help. If he talked to me and told me to do this and that, if he gave me the steps, then I could do it in the right way. (Karim)

Twelve interviewees shared this view implying a reliance on the professor explaining how to complete a task rather than having students trying to work through their tasks

independently. This confirms the view that independent learning can be a significant hurdle for first-year students to overcome (Murtagh, 2010). Despite an awareness that support from professors would be different from the support they had received from teachers, one interviewee pointed out that it was most likely due to the large number of students a professor was responsible for.

They don't know you so they don't care about you ... it's because they have thousands of students to teach, so why would they care about one student?
(Zahra)

This argument implies that students felt that their teachers cared for them, but that their professors do not demonstrate the same type of care. It also suggests that seeking support is not only for academic reasons; the way in which this support is provided can have an emotional impact on the student. One interviewee explained how their reaction to what they perceived as negative feedback was a motivation to putting more effort into their work, and to do this independently.

I had this professor and I don't think they even cared if we passed or failed....
But you know, it made me work so much harder.... this is about me and my own efforts. (Saffron)

While some interviewees expressed their personal motivation to push ahead and work independently at an early stage, a majority provided examples of how feedback affected their

confidence. For example, one interviewee described how negative feedback made them more anxious about their next project.

I was worried when they gave me a poor grade because I'd tried my best. She didn't explain to me properly how to improve. Now I don't feel confident about my next piece of work. (Layla)

The implication of this example is that feedback, when done in the right way, can be motivating and confidence building. It also suggests that feedback needs to be clear enough to be understood by students, so they know what steps to take to make future improvements.

In the survey, students were asked to indicate their views concerning the support they expected to receive at university, and whether feedback from their professor made them work harder (Figure 4.3). The results appear to indicate fairly similar views for the first question where a majority of male (75%) and female students (74%) agreed (*strongly agreed* or *agreed*) that they had initial concerns about the support they would receive from their professor. Views expressed by interviewees provide some explanation for this high level of initial concern. For the second question asking whether the feedback they received made them work harder, a statistically significant difference was indicated between male and female students studying at private HEIs. A Mann-Whitney *U* test found that a significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (85% of which 39% *strongly agreed*) felt that they now work harder as a result of the feedback they received from their professor in comparison to female students in private HEIs (61% of which 16% *strongly agreed*) ($z = -2.742, p < .05$).

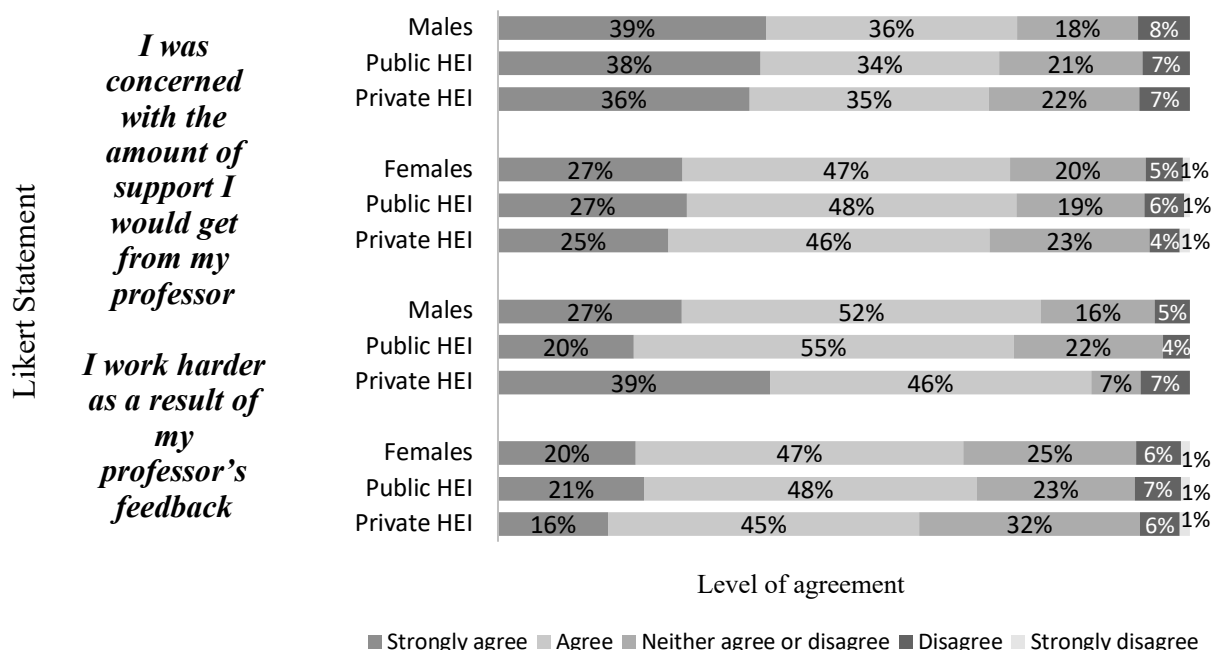


Figure 4.3. Perceptions concerning Support and Feedback

This could potentially be due to the different expectations held by male and female students concerning what they understand to be hard work and increased effort. However, as the difference was found in private HEIs and not public HEIs, it would suggest that the influence of feedback from faculty in private HEIs is having a significant effect on male students, which as a result is making them work harder. This would indicate that the feedback from faculty in private HEIs is delivered differently to feedback in public HEIs. It would also indicate that the feedback mechanisms in private HEIs are more suitable for male students than female students. A suggestion in this case would be for private HEIs to have different feedback mechanisms for male students and for female students.

Academic Advising

Students were asked about their views, perceptions and experiences of academic advising. The majority of interviewees perceived academic advising as beneficial with their descriptions of the relationship with their professor as having two dimensions: personal and constructive. The personal relationship they described included the development of trust that helped to build their confidence level alongside contributing to the student's sense of belonging. The constructive dimension was seen as contributing to learner growth and cognitive development. One half of interviewees believed that their professor had been aware of a student's difficulties without the issue being raised by the student. For example, one student described how their confidence had improved when their professor encouraged them to increase their level of participation in class discussions.

The professor noticed that I wasn't interacting, and he told me next time speak up and whatever you have to say is relevant and don't be afraid, and he told me that people could learn from me. It made me feel that my thoughts mattered. I'm a bit more confident now; it gets a bit easier each time I speak. (Iman)

This quotation clearly shows that personal feedback can affect how engaged a student is with their learning and can build their sense of belonging. This supports the work of Khan and Khan (2019) who emphasized the importance UAE students place on personal and constructive feedback. It also confirms the views of Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) who found that a strong relationship with a tutor can help develop learner growth. The sense of belonging was described by another interviewee who understood the importance of the student-faculty relationship.

At university they treat us more like adults. We have thoughts and opinions and they want to hear what we think. It's different from school when they treated us like they knew everything, and we knew nothing. They help me to think differently here. (Elham)

This quotation clearly shows that perceptions students have of their learning experiences are changing, and that these changes are influenced by their faculty. These findings strongly support the critical role that a professor has in supporting their students, and the gains in student interactions with faculty, which have been found in several studies (Bowman, 2014; King & Kerr, 2005; Krause, 2001; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). In recognizing the benefits of seeking academic advice, one interviewee reflecting on their first-year experience, described the advice they would give to new students.

For an accurate answer I would go directly to my professor and that's what I would advise newcomers to university to do. Whatever problems you face, even if you're shy, even if you fail the test, go back to your professor because he's the only one who's really going to help you. (Junaid)

Seven interviewees pointed out that their professor had made themselves available out of scheduled hours to provide additional support. One half of interviewees also described how they appreciated the approachability of their professors and felt less reluctant to request additional meetings with them. According to Stephen, O'Connell and Hall (2008) approachable tutors can make students feel at home, and, as a result, provides them with a stronger sense of belonging.

This, in turn would allow students to experience the transition to university with less attachment to school.

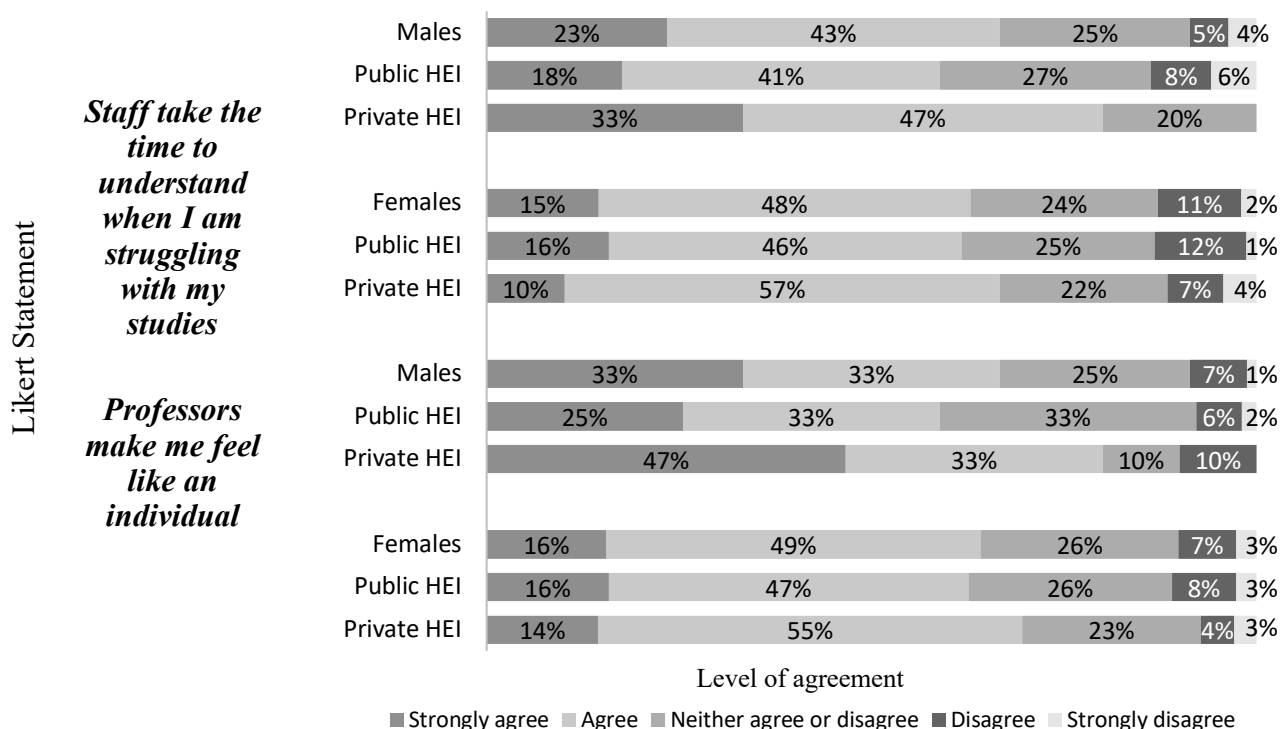


Figure 4.4. Perceptions concerning Academic Advising

In the survey, students were asked about two aspects of academic advising: if staff made took the time to help students when they were struggling with their studies, and if they felt like they were being treated as an individual. For the first question, a majority of female students in public HEIs (62%) and private HEIs (67%) agreed. A Mann-Whitney U test indicated that a significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs agreed (80% of which 33% *strongly agreed*) in comparison to male students in public HEIs (59% of which 18% *strongly agreed*) ($z = -2.331, p < .05$). A Mann-Whitney U test also found that a significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (80% of which 33% *strongly agreed*) felt this way in comparison to female students in private HEIs (67% of which 10% *strongly agreed*) ($z = -2.571,$

$p < .05$). These results again show that male students in private HEIs are benefitting the most by the advice and support they receive from faculty.

When asked whether their professor made them feel like an individual, a majority of both male (66%) and female students (65%) agreed (*strongly agreed* or *agreed*) with the statement. A Mann-Whitney U test found that a significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (80% of which 47% *strongly agreed*) expressed this view in comparison to female students in private HEIs (69% of which 14% *strongly agreed*) ($z = -2.543, p < .05$). The pattern continues of male students in private HEIs expressing their views more positively than other students.

4.3.4 Theme 3: Assessment

Assessment emerged as a theme as students described their worries about doing well in assessment, the ways in which they prepared for examinations, and how marks and comments they received made an impact on their experience.

Assessment Anxiety

When discussing assessment, the majority of interviewees described initial concerns. The fear of failure featured in almost all responses where strong emotions were expressed. Examples ranged from “I always had good marks in school, and now it’s a complete disaster” (Junaid), to “It was hard to study for tests because I remember my grades kept getting lower and lower and I was worried about failing a test. I was completely freaking out” (Farah). These quotations confirm views that students experience shock when they get lower than expected grades (Beattie et al., 2019; Birch & Miller, 2007; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). Three quarters of interviewees acknowledged the difference between taking assessments in school compared to

university. For example, one interviewee recognised that the option to repeat a test in order to improve their mark was no longer an option.

Anyone who does badly on that test has no chance of finishing the course for the year... It's nerve-racking... in school, there was always a chance, even if I did badly in a test, that I could repeat it (Fahd)

The difference between the styles of assessment used in school compared to those in university also resulted in students not knowing what to expect or how to adequately prepare. This was described by one interviewee who resorted to guesswork.

In school, I always knew what was going to come in my test, how it was going to come.... but for this I have no clue.... I just have to figure it out (Layla)

This quotation suggests that exemplars or past papers were not available to the student or that they had not been accessed. It also implies that not all students seek support from their professors when preparing for assessment tasks. References to school were often made, and one interviewee shared their experience of mistakenly trying to use a study method that had been successful in school but had disastrous results in university.

The lesson I learned is that you have to plan and prepare properly for your exams. And I learned that sleep is important; it's as important as studying, even more important. I crammed my revision and I should've started studying it before, but I was used to the school's way of studying. You know, even if it was

the final exam, I'd only spend two days studying. I made a big mistake doing this at university. I completely blanked and failed my exam. It's much better now because I'm taking my studies more seriously. (Issa)

This quotation suggests that the student understands that the style of assessment in university is very different to that of school (Green, 2006). It also supports studies arguing that university assessments affect the way students study (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2008; Turner & Gibbs, 2010).

In the survey, male and female students were asked to indicate their views concerning assessments (Figure 4.5). Fairly similar views were indicated when students were asked if they knew what was required in assessments (76%), and if they had found assessments challenging during their first year (32%). When asked if they were initially concerned about doing well in assessments, 81% of all students agreed (*agreed* or *strongly agreed*), and a statistical difference was found between male and female students. A significantly higher proportion of male students (88%) were concerned about assessments than female students (79%) ($z = -2.559, p < .05$). A Mann-Whitney U test also indicated a significant difference in private HEIs, where more male students (90%) were concerned about assessments than female students (76%) ($z = -2.559, p < .05$). These findings suggest that male students were more concerned about assessments when starting university than their female counterparts, and that this anxiety was felt more extremely by male students in private HEIs.

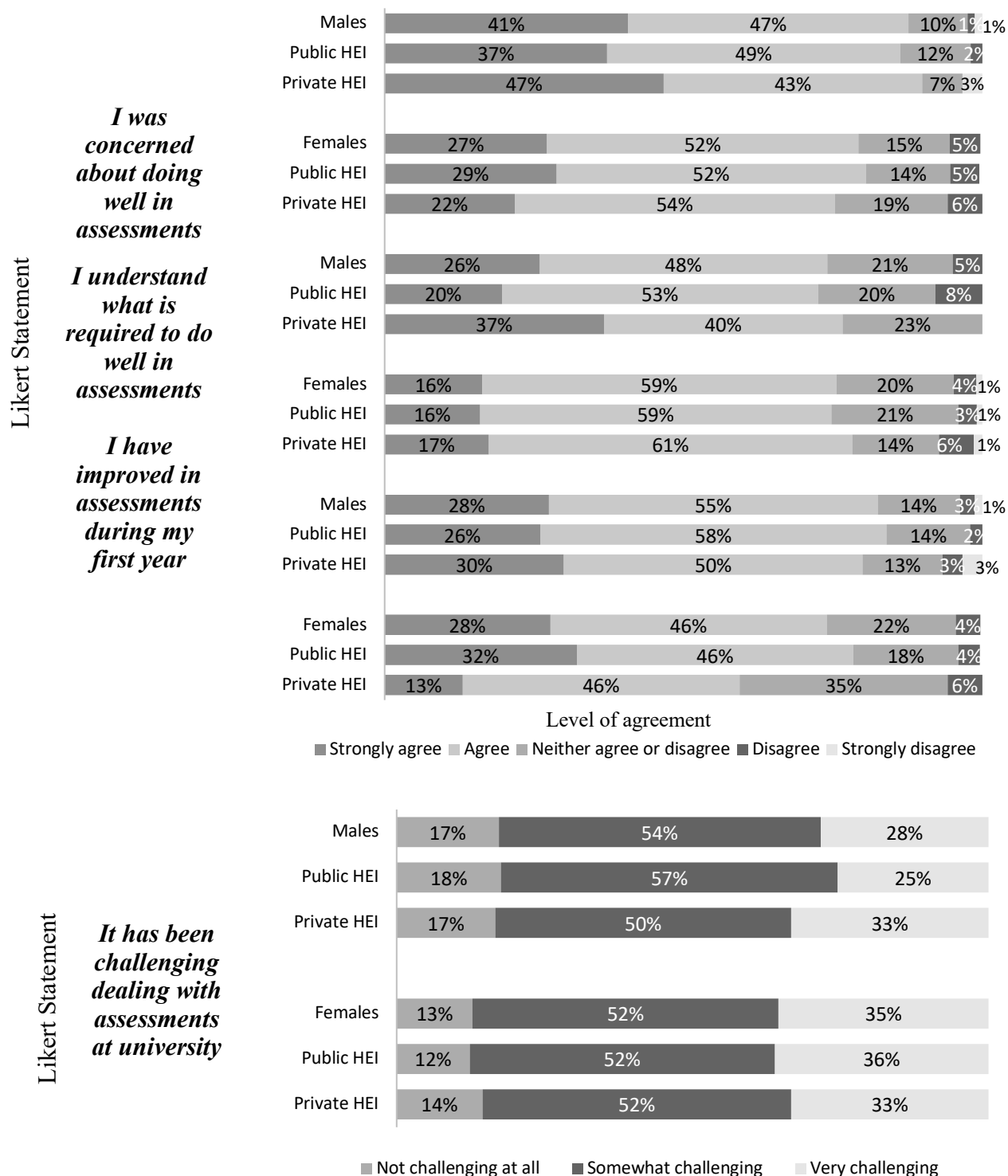


Figure 4.5. Perceptions concerning Assessments

Statistical differences were found when students were asked if they had made improvements in their assessments during their first year. A significantly higher proportion of all the male students surveyed (83%) felt they had made improvements in comparison to all the female students surveyed (74%) ($z = -3.144, p < .05$). A significant difference was also found in private HEIs where more male students (80%) felt that they had made improvements in assessments compared to female students (59%) ($z = -2.224, p < .05$). This finding suggests that even though a large proportion of male students in private HEIs had expressed the greatest concern about assessments when they started university, a large proportion had also felt that they had made improvements during their first year. There are several implications from this finding: that there is a perceived view by male students that assessments in private HEIs are more difficult than in reality, that male students in private HEIs had made the greatest academic progress, or that male students in private HEIs are now more confident about their performance in, and preparation for assessments.

A significant difference was also found between female students at each type of HEI. A significantly higher proportion of female students in public HEIs (78%) felt that they had improved in their assessments compared to female students in private HEIs (59%) ($z = -3.709, p < .05$). There are several implications to these findings. If students believe they have improved in their assessments in public HEIs, then the assessment format used may be similar across subjects within a course, so students can become increasingly familiar with the layout. An alternative suggestion is that students in public HEIs may have greater access to past papers, or they may be provided with more assessment support than students in private HEIs.

Exam Preparation

One half of interviewees made comparisons between the assessments in university and those in school. One interviewee recognised that memorization and surface learning would not lead to success, and that it was more important to understand what they were learning.

I had tests in school...80% was based on what they taught you. It was what was passed on to you and you giving it back...Meanwhile in university it's about what you understood and what you think is right. (Issa)

While recognizing the need to understand and think more deeply, interviewees described difficulties in exam preparation. One interviewee implied a lack of clarity in what was expected when answering a question. This suggests the need for past papers and exemplars to be readily available, particularly for the initial assessments, so students can gradually become accustomed to the style of question and quality of answers.

Exams in university are much harder than they were in school.... It can be hard just knowing what he wants from the question that he asked. In school it was really clear. Now we have to think more deeply. (Latif)

This quotation shows that the student understands that a different approach is needed when studying at university and in preparing for university assessments. This supports Green's (2006) argument that students in higher education must learn to synthesise information and should be reading more widely.

In the survey, male and female students were asked to indicate their views concerning exam preparation (Figure 4.6). When asked if they only studied the material that would be in the exam, similar views were found. A majority of male students (73%) and female students (68%) disagreed (*disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*) with the statement. This finding suggests that the majority of students are aware of the need to study their subject more broadly, rather than relying only on information provided in lectures (Green, 2006).

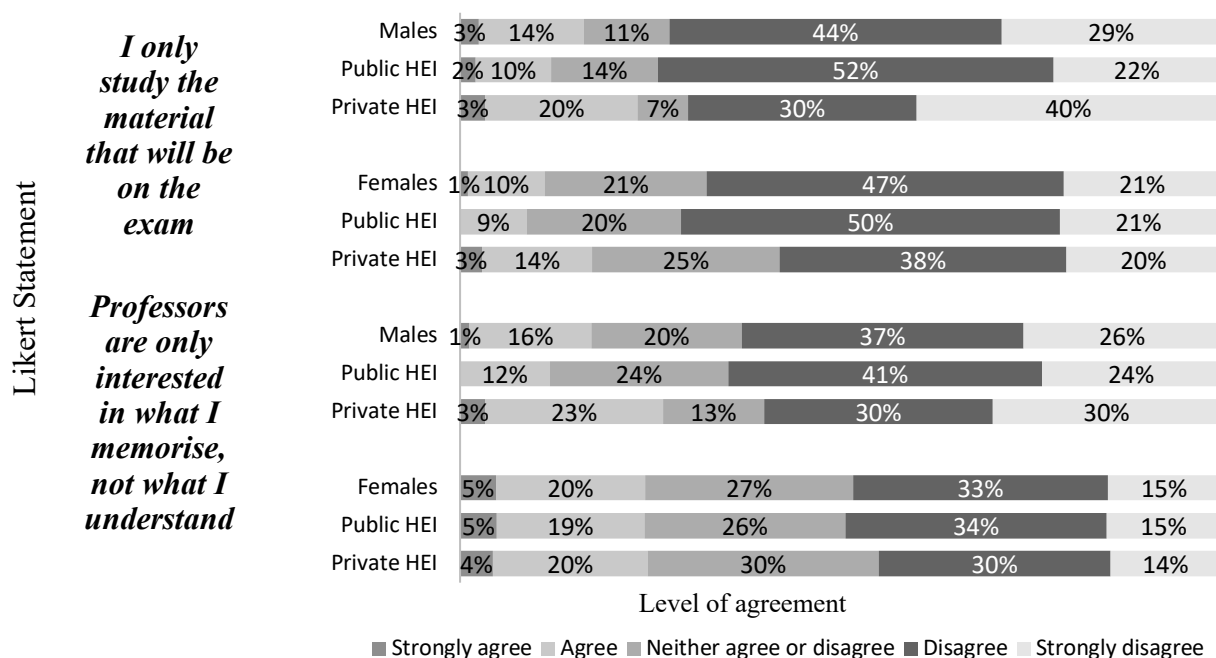


Figure 4.6. Perceptions concerning Exam Preparation

When students were asked if they thought their professor placed too great an emphasis on what they had remembered rather than what they had understood, the proportion of male students (53%) who disagreed (*disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*) was slightly larger than the proportion of female students (48%). Fairly similar results were found when comparing the views of male and female student in private HEIs, and a significant difference was found between male and female

students in public HEIs. A significantly higher proportion of female students (24%) than male students (12%) in public HEIs thought their professors were more interested in having student remember information instead of understanding what the information means and how it can be used ($z = -2.369, p < .05$). The reason behind this finding could be explained by the assertion of Arnold and Rowaan (2014) that male and female students according to the type of assessment they are doing. Male students may find the assessments more challenging than they did at school, and as a result perceive a greater need to ‘understand’ rather than ‘memorise’. Another reason could be that female students enjoy the intellectual challenge of university more than their male counterparts as argued by Krause et al. (2005). The style of assessment could be another reason for this difference supporting the argument that female students have a more negative opinion than male students when they describe their perceptions of formal examinations (Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, 2005).

Value of Marks and Comments

One quarter of interviewees described their struggles with understanding what represented a good grade in university. This suggests that the use of grading in university is inconsistent with the use of grading in schools. One interviewee explained their surprise at receiving a poor grade, only to be told that it was a good grade for university.

The tests are different, the curriculum is different, and the grading techniques are also different.... I just needed to understand what the marks meant. (Farah)

This quotation clearly shows the important role of faculty in sharing expectations, rubrics and the range of grades and marks that students should expect for their assessments. A similar

example was provided by another interviewee when describing their confusion over what constituted a good piece of academic writing. This suggests that all assignment expectations and grading systems should be explicitly shared with first-year students to minimize confusion about the awarding of marks.

It was the first time to submit writing ...but I didn't know that what I wrote was good (Malika)

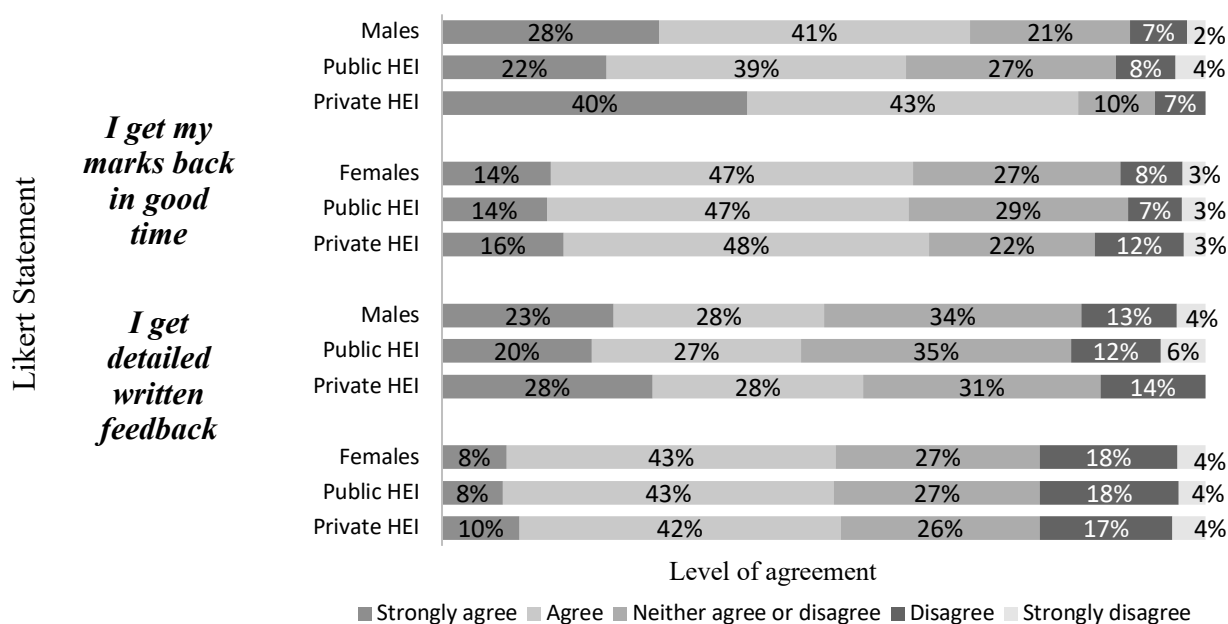


Figure 4.7. Perceptions concerning Marking and Feedback

In the survey, male and female students were asked to indicate their views concerning marking and written feedback (Figure 4.7). When asked if they get detailed written feedback from assessments, fairly similar results were indicated. Half of male students (51%) and female students (51%) agreed (*agreed* or *strongly agreed*) with the statement. When students were asked if they get their marks back in good time a significant difference was found between male

students in each type of HEI, and between male and female students in private HEIs. A significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (83%) than male students in public HEIs (61%) felt marks were given back in good time ($z = -2.247, p < .05$). In private HEIs, a significantly higher proportion of male students (83%) in comparison to female students (64%) was also found ($z = -2.686, p < .05$). Fairly similar results were found when comparing the views of male and female student in public HEIs. The pattern of markedly positive responses from male students in private HEIs compared to other groups of students has continued in this section of the results.

Getting marks back in good time had also been discussed as an issue during the interviews. One quarter of interviewees expressed concern and dismay over the way in which their professor provided feedback to them after an assessment. The greatest concern was when work was marked over a very short time period, giving the student the impression that it had not been marked accurately. One interviewee described an incident when they had received a graded piece of work on the same day as when it was submitted and made an assumption that the grade, they received was inaccurate.

If a teacher needs to grade an essay, it will take a week or a month because he has a lot of students. But my teacher used to grade it in an hour, so I know that grading is not accurate. I don't think he even used the rubric (Zahra)

This confirms the view from studies showing that students like feedback to be timely and prompt, but that this needs to be within a realistic timeframe. An acceptable timeframe suggested in the studies is considered to be around 15 days (Bohnacker-Bruce, 2013; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017).

4.3.5 Theme 4: Learner Identity

The theme of learner identity emerged as students described different ways in which they were creating a new identity for themselves as they embarked on their higher education journey. The theme included experiences of how they were adapting to the new academic demands, their skills development, a new approach to learning. Through these descriptions, students expressed a change in attitude towards their studies and an improved confidence in their approach.

Adjusting to Academic Demands

The majority of interviewees described the pressure of having a demanding workload, a high pace of learning, and being subject to strict deadlines. One interviewee described one of the first weeks of term as extremely challenging.

It was the most stressful week of my life, my whole schedule was filled, I didn't even have time to breathe...I would work all day at university then I would come back home and have to study for something else ...it was going at a very fast pace and deadlines were just around the corner. Things were getting more intense and I just couldn't keep up. (Iman)

The argument presented by the interviewee confirms the view of Baker (2018) who found that the challenges of adapting to the workload are felt more intensely at the start of university life. Another interviewee compared the more comfortable, small step approach that had been used in school and the need to learn quickly and multi-task at university.

In school, I remember that it was step-by-step, small steps. But in university, it moves so quickly, and we can easily get confused. (Haider)

Despite an awareness of the increased workload and academic demands that would be placed on students in their first year at university, one quarter of interviewees were more concerned with meeting deadlines and the strictness with which a deadline was applied. Some interviewees accepted that it was their responsibility to meet deadlines whilst acknowledging that procrastination can be a hindrance.

It's harder in university because...I am a person who always procrastinates....in university you have to finish your work on time... It's the department who has put the deadline so no one can change it. (Malika)

In this quotation, the interviewee implies that in their past experience from high school, deadlines had been changed which, as a result, allowed them to procrastinate for longer. Another interviewee also referred to submitting assignments after the deadline, accusing universities of being too strict rather than accepting responsibility to meet the deadline themselves.

In school we could hand assignments in late and it was okay, it didn't affect our marks, but university is so, so strict (Junaid)

A half of interviewees described the challenges they experienced with 'what' they were learning rather than 'how' they were learning, with some attributing this to subjects they found difficult. Even though a study by Murshidi (2014) found that poor English skills were a big

worry for Emiratis, interviewee responses suggest that the studying of Arabic and Islamic civilization are more likely sources of frustration and anxiety than English. One interviewee explained the difficulty students by arguing that the taught Arabic language is very different to the commonly used and spoken Arabic language.

Arabic subjects are really hard. The theory it's so hard for me to be honest. I'm local [Emirati] but still I was raised speaking English. (Asad)

This quotation implies that there is a confidence with which students communicate in English, however this may be a phenomenon occurring more commonly with students who had previously attended a private school in the UAE where English was the main language of instruction. This point was argued by another interviewee who described the difficulties they experienced in the traditional subjects of Arabic and Islamic civilization, suggesting that the difficulty was more likely to be because of the teacher rather than the subjects themselves.

Arabic and Islamic, they have definitely been the most challenging for me.

Arabic is my mother tongue but it's really hard for me. And Islamic, it's not normal Islamic, it's Islamic civilization, and I hate history. What's challenging me more is the teacher. He'd give a topic and then says the students will explain it. I'm from a private school. I think girls from government schools find it easier. To be honest, the Arabic and Islamic professors are so different to our proper professors, their teaching style is completely different. (Malika)

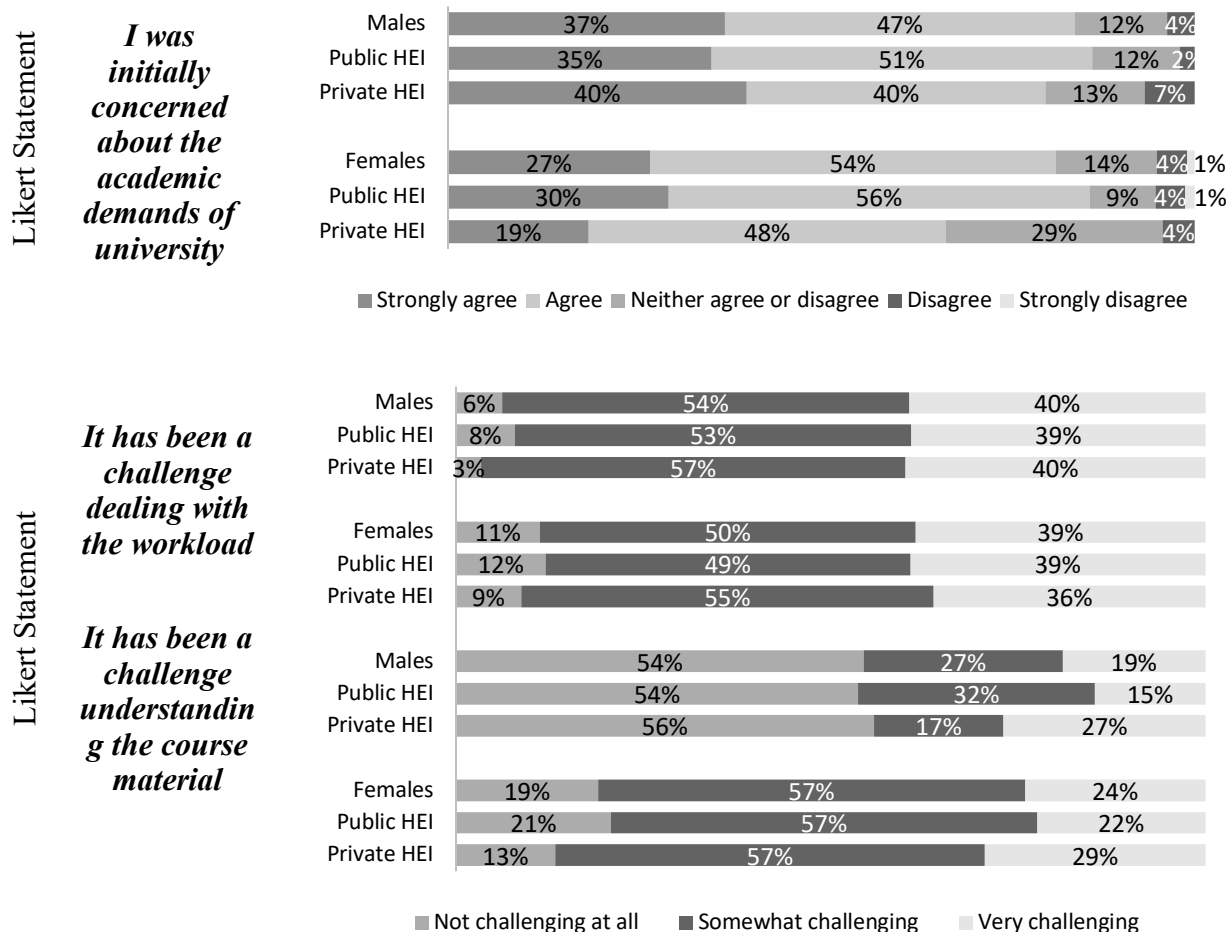


Figure 4.8. Perceptions concerning Academic Demands

In the survey, male and female students were asked to indicate views concerning the academic demands they experienced during their first year at university (Figure 4.8). Fairly similar views were indicated by all students with approximately 40% finding the workload very challenging. When asked about their initial concerns about the academic demands of university, a significant difference was found between female students at each type of HEI, and between male and female students at private HEIs. A significantly higher proportion of female students in public HEIs (86%) than those in private HEIs (67%) were initially concerned ($z = -2.995, p < .05$). A significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs were also initially concerned (80%) in comparison to female students in private HEIs (67%) ($z = -1.985, p < .05$).

When students were asked if they had found it difficult understanding the course material, a significant difference was found between male and female students across both type of HEI. A significantly higher proportion of male students (54%) indicated that the course material was not challenging at all compared to female students (19%) ($z = -2.031, p < .05$). This finding supports studies suggesting that female students are more conscientious than their male counterparts (Francis, Read & Melling, 2003; Sheard, 2009; Smith, 2004). It could be argued that if they are more conscientious, they are more concerned with understanding every detail of the work being studied. If there is any detail that they do not understand, it is seen as a difficulty in their eyes. Male students, on the other hand, may be satisfied understanding a topic as a whole rather than every detail.

Skills Development

While new subjects presented students with challenges, a majority of interviewees also described the challenges that were being experienced regarding study skills. A third of interviewees were concerned about note taking and making sense of all the information they were presented with.

You have to multi-task; basically listen, write, and understand; three things at one time which is really hard. (Musa)

Others described how they were building on skills they already had: “I scan the paper instead of reading it so it's easier now. I am building skills” (Zahra), and “Writing things down makes it easier so you can draw diagrams rather than just notes” (Saffron). Despite an awareness

that their current skills needed to improve, half of the interviewees recognised the need to acquire new study skills for university. One interviewee explained how they were learning how to think more critically and were gaining confidence when giving their opinion to others.

I would be like this is right and this is wrong, and this happened because of this, and so on. And then I would start formalizing, so this led to this, this, this, in my own way... The most beneficial part I think was knowing how to give my opinion. (Issa)

This quotation shows the interviewee has an understanding of the learning process and can explain how and why it is applied. A quarter of interviewees also described the importance of thorough preparation to help their understanding of a subject: “I have to get ready and expect any question from my professor, so I would have to study the background too” (Zahra), and “I do have a subject I find difficult. I make more time for it... I would look for books about it I try to work it out for myself” (Latif). These examples show a shift in attitude towards learning with as skills are being developed.

Male and female students were asked about their study skills and if the new way of learning has been challenging (Figure 4.9). When asked if they were initially concerned about having the right study skills for university, a majority of students (81%) agreed (*agreed* or *strongly agreed*), with a significant difference found between male and female students. A higher proportion of male students (88%) were concerned about having the right study skills in comparison to female students (78%) in all HEIs ($z = -2.060, p < .05$). This was more pronounced in private HEIs where a higher proportion of male students (90%) were concerned in comparison to female students (74%) ($z = -2.112, p < .05$). A significant difference was again shown between

male and female students in private HEIs when they were asked how challenging they found adapting to the new way of learning. The experience of difficulty was expressed by a significantly higher proportion of male students (34%) than for female students (14%) in private HEIs ($z = -3.162, p < .05$). When asked if students feel that their study skills have improved, 87% of all students felt that this was the case. Fairly similar results were found when comparing the views of male and female student in public HEIs. However, a significant difference was again found when comparing male and female students in private HEIs. A significantly higher proportion of male students (93%) described their skills as having improved in comparison to female students (71%) ($z = -2.015, p < .05$). These results suggest that a higher proportion of male students at private HEIs were more concerned about having the right skills for university, found the new way of learning more challenging, but also thought their study skills were now more effective. This was found to be the case when comparing them to female students in private HEIs.

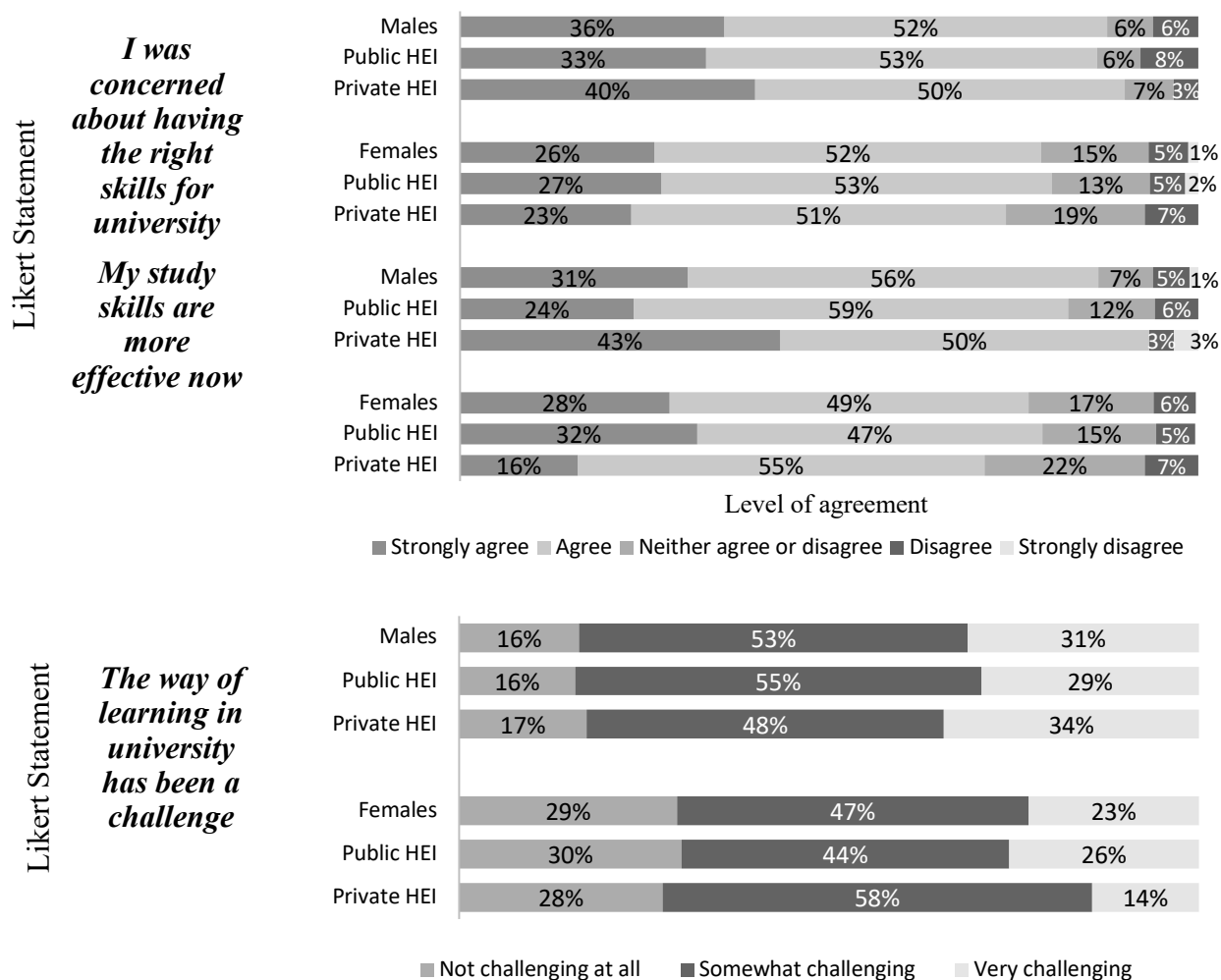


Figure 4.9. Perceptions concerning Study Skills

Male and female students were asked to indicate views on how their skills have developed during their first year at university (Figure 4.10). Several significant differences were found in both categories. When asked if the course had helped students improve their academic skills, differences were found between female students at each type of HEI, and also between male and female students at private HEIs. A Mann-Whitney U test found that a significantly higher proportion of female students in public HEIs (76%) felt that their academic skills had improved when compared to female students in private HEIs (65%) ($z = -2.225, p < .05$). A

significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (83%) also felt that their skills had improved compared to female students in private HEIs (65%) ($z = -3.268, p < .05$). When asked if they were able to summarise information, there were significant differences across institutions, and between male and female students in private HEIs. A significantly higher proportion of students in public HEIs compared to students in private HEIs felt they could summarise information. For male students, the difference was 83% compared to 60% respectively ($z = -2.734, p < .05$), and for female students the comparison was 82% to 66% respectively ($z = -2.938, p < .05$). A significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (86%) compared to female students in private HEIs (66%) felt that they could summarise notes.

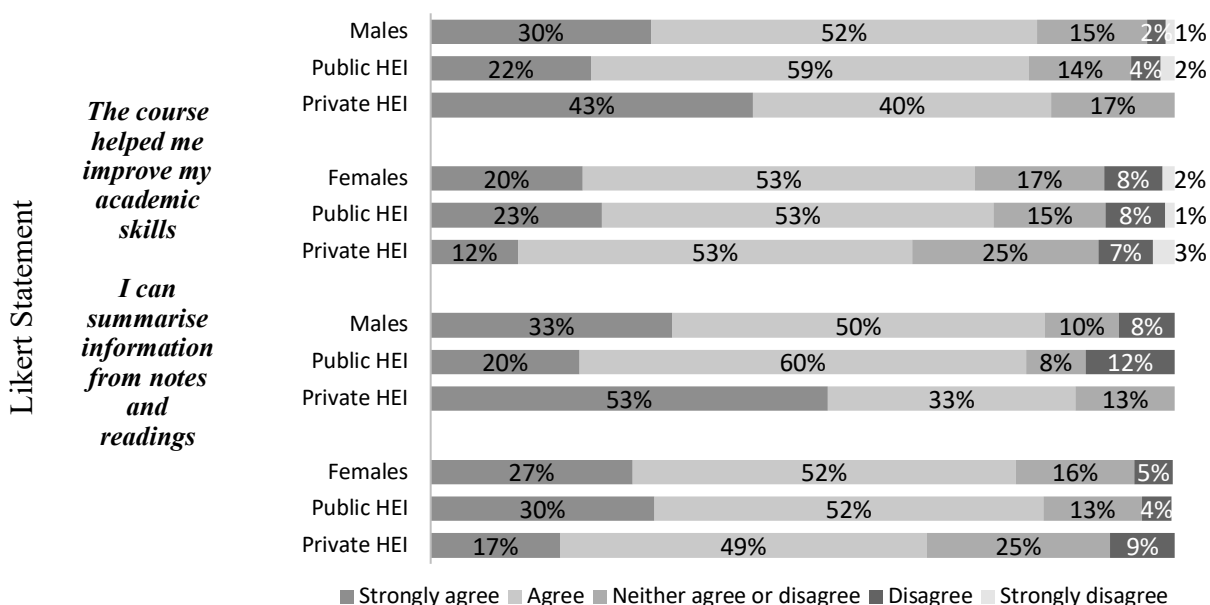


Figure 4.10. Perceptions concerning Skills Development

Adopting a New Learning Stance

Almost all interviewees described a change in their study habits since starting university. The four themes most often referred to were new routines, a preferred study location, time spent

studying and whether they studied with others or alone. For example, one interviewee impressed upon their commitment to complete their work so they would arrive at university the next day fully prepared.

I would go home.... I would study what we took and then prepare for the next class. Without fail, I would do this every day. (Farah)

A study by Hagan and Macdonald (2000) suggested that study habits developed in school tended to persist when students were in higher education. Findings from this study challenge this assertion as the majority of interviewees describe how different their study habits have become since starting university. The differences include where they study and the routines they have now adopted. An example provided by one interviewee describes a change in their study habits that began during their first semester.

In my first semester I would study with people, but I feel that I can focus more when I'm alone. I come to university to study every weekend now. (Issa)

Similarly, one third of interviewees preferred using the library to study and terms such as 'avoiding distractions', 'focus', and 'being able to concentrate' were frequently mentioned as interviewees expressed a serious attitude towards their learning.

I definitely study alone so I can concentrate. Sometimes at home but sometimes in the private rooms they have here in the library. I never studied in the library at

school. Actually, we couldn't really study at school because we had lessons all day and then went home. (Saffron)

The survey results suggest that approximately 66% of first-year students are spending more time studying than they did at school. This view was also expressed by the majority of interviewees. One recognised that even when more time is spent studying, it may not be enough.

I spend much more time studying at university...at school, maybe one hour is enough, but in university five hours isn't even enough" (Khadija)

This view was shared by the majority of interviewees, but this often came with a reason why they were choosing to devote so much time to their studies.

I would stay in the university to 8 in the evening, or 9. I would stay really long hours...it's really time consuming but I really enjoy it, like it doesn't matter if it takes time, if I'm passionate about it then it won't matter. (Iman)

In the survey, students were asked to indicate their study habits (Figure 4.11). When asked if they have a private tutor, a significant difference was found between male and female students across all HEIs. A Mann-Whitney *U* test found that a significantly higher proportion of female students (55%) compared to male students (35%) agreed to having a private tutor ($z = -3.192, p < .05$).

When comparing the amount of time spent studying in university compared to school, a significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (77%) compared to all other

groups claimed to be spending more time studying since starting university. The average number of hours studied per week was found to be 6.44 h for all respondents. Students studied for fewer hours at public universities with male students averaging 4.94 h per week and female students averaging 5.89 h per week. In contrast, students spent more time studying at private universities, with male students averaging the most (8.97 h per week) compared to female students (7.56 h per week). A pattern throughout this chapter has shown that the experiences of first-year male students at private HEIs is often significantly different to the experiences of other students.

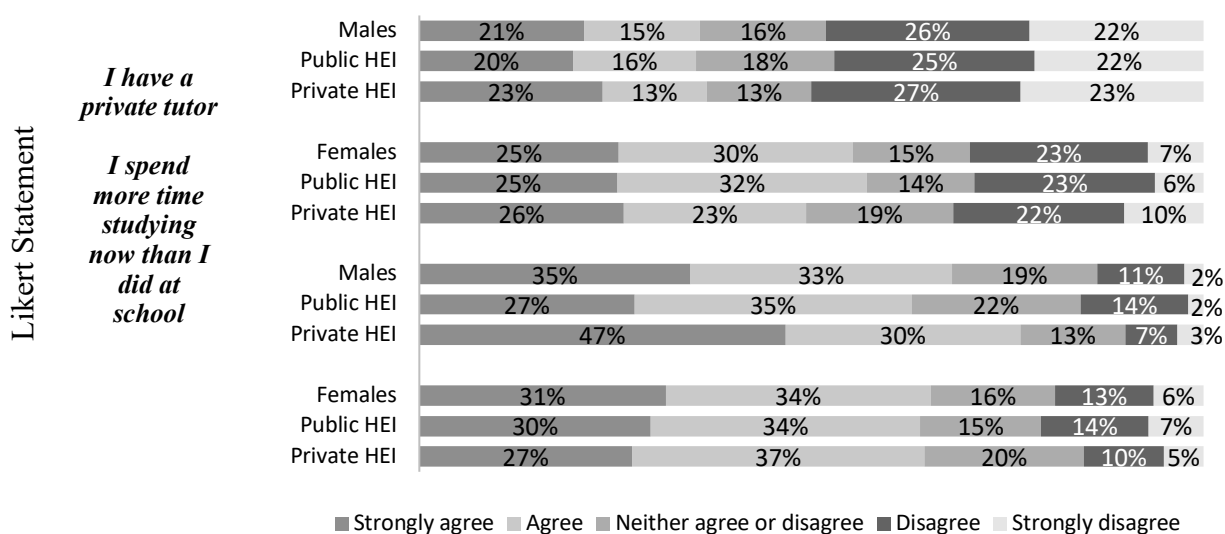


Figure 4.11. Perceptions concerning Study Habits

New Attitude towards Learning

The majority of interviewees acknowledged that the responsibility lay with them to attend classes, meet deadlines and make the effort. This was explained by one interviewee who argued that a shift had taken place so instead of being provided for, as was the case in school, it was time to take the initiative and own the role of being a university student.

They're not going to force you to come to class. But if you keep missing class and not doing your homework, you'll face consequences. Now, I make sure that

I get it, it's not their job to make sure of it, it yours. It's not like school where it's their job to give you the answer, now it's about your effort. (Dahab)

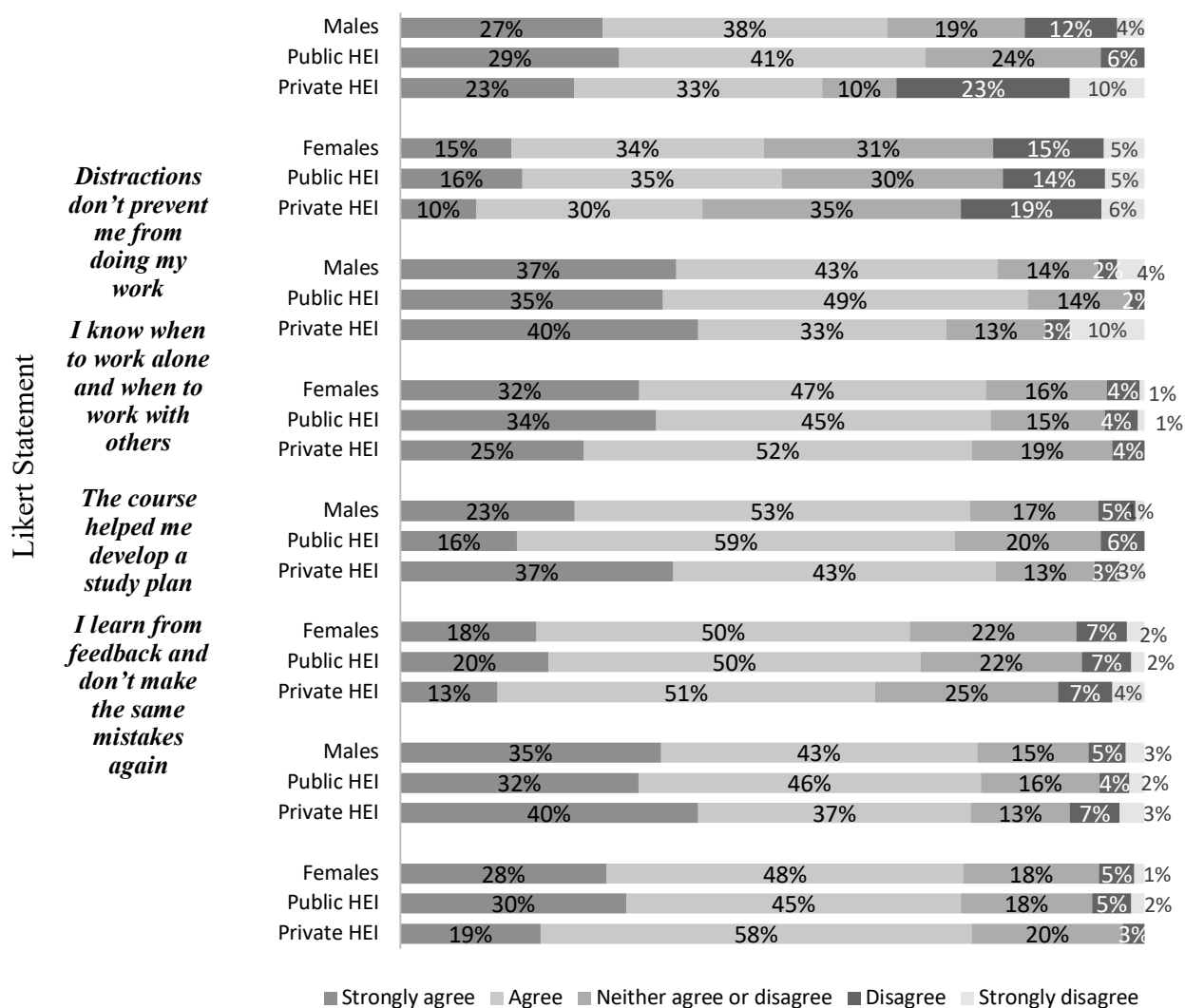


Figure 4.12. Perceptions concerning Attitudes towards Learning

In the survey, male and female students were asked to indicate views their attitudes towards learning and how they have changed during their first year at university (Figure 4.12). There were fairly similar views between all students when asked if they had learned from the feedback provided from their professor (52%), and if they knew when to work alone and when to

work with others (79%). Significant differences were found in two categories: being able to ignore distractions where a difference was found for students in public HEIs, and if the course has helped students to develop a study plan where the difference was in private HEIs. A Mann-Whitney U test found a significantly higher proportion of male students in public HEIs (70%) were able to ignore distractions in comparison to female student in public HEIs (51%) ($z = -3.003, p < .05$). A Mann-Whitney U test also found a significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (80%) thought that the course had helped them to develop a study plan in comparison to female students in private HEIs (64%) ($z = -2.452, p < .05$).

More Confident Learning Orientation

Interviewees provided mixed responses regarding their experiences of giving presentations. The three themes that emerged were concerns about having the right presentation skills, the level of interaction with the audience, and how often students were giving presentations. A majority of interviewees were experienced in making presentations when they were at school. This ranged from those who were confident presenters: “I grew up doing presentations at school, so it was easy. I just say what I need to, so I’m confident presenting” (Uthman), to those who realized that they needed to improve their presentation skills: “In school, when I would present I would put all the information on the board and I would just read off it, but in university I learned that I couldn’t do that” (Iman).

A study by Murshidi (2014) suggested that Emirati students are less comfortable when making presentations than non-Emirati students. This is confirmed by the survey results with 81% of male students and 73% of female students expressing their concern. With a generally positive view of their presentation skills, the concern appears to be the audience. Eleven of the interviewees expressed concern in presenting because they did not know the audience. One

interviewee explained that giving presentations in university was difficult because there was no interaction from them.

You can't easily interact with the audience...I did a presentation this week and I was really nervous, and I didn't know anyone looking at me...you don't know if you're doing good or you're doing bad because they all have straight faces and don't interact with you at all, it's like they aren't interested and that's what makes it difficult. (Malika)

This quotation clearly shows the need for student practice in giving formal and informal presentations, and to encourage audience participation. While practice could be beneficial, interviewees acknowledged that it may not stop them from feeling nervous, but it could provide them with increasing confidence as their presentation skills are developed.

We present a lot, it took me around 3 presentations then I was okay by then... now I'm more confident presenting (Latif)

In the survey, male and female students were asked for their views concerning their confidence in making presentations and speaking to others (Figure 4.13). Fairly similar views were found when students were asked if they were initially concerned about making presentations. The initial concern was high, with male students (81%) being slightly more concerned than female students (73%). Similarly, a majority of students also often made contributions to class discussions, with male students (66%) participating slightly more than female students (57%). Views differed when students were asked whether their confidence in

presenting and class participation had improved during their first year. A Mann-Whitney U test found a significantly higher proportion of male students in private HEIs (80%) in comparison to female students in private HEIs (66%) felt their confidence had increased ($z = -2.761, p < .05$).

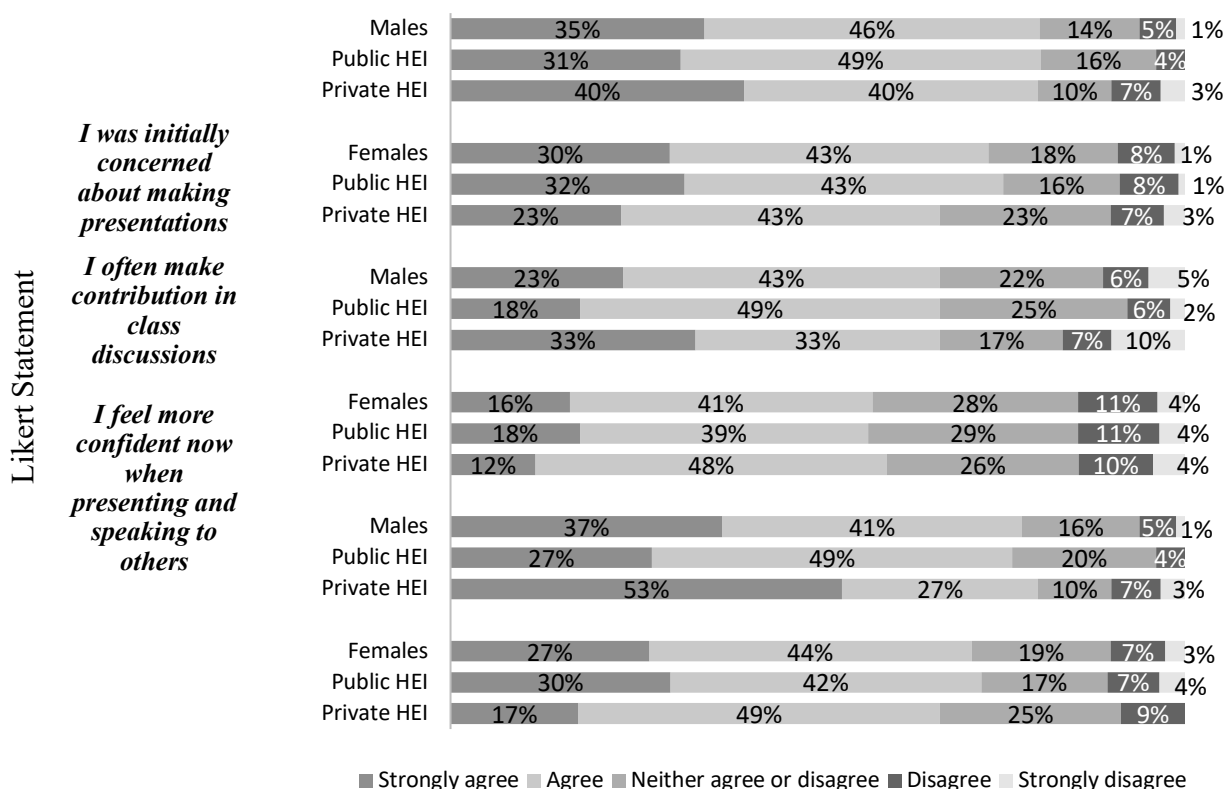


Figure 4.13. Perceptions concerning a more Confident Learning Orientation

4.3.6 Theme 5: The Benefits and Drawbacks of Peer Interaction

The final theme is that of peer interaction on three different levels: working with others on group assignments and learning from one another, issues surrounding male and female interaction with particular views on interactions between Emiratis, and future views of the UAE and the workplace.

Collegiality

Interviewees provided mixed views when describing their experiences of interacting with their peers. The descriptions had four themes: learning from each other, improving confidence, developing a shared sense of responsibility, and the impact on grades. One interviewee explained the benefits of working with their peers and learning from each other.

I feel when I read their work, I learn from them and they learn from me. I learn to accept that people could learn from me, that I'm useful (Iman)

This suggests that working with others and exchanging views can help students develop to acquire a better understanding of the topic because they are learning to see things from different viewpoints. It also helps students to build confidence in the own abilities and appreciate the value of their contribution to a team task or assignment, especially during their first year at university. This finding confirms claims that when students interact with their peers, it makes their experience of transition easier (Bowman, 2014; Dweck, 1999; Krause, 2001). Another positive effect was through the sharing of responsibility. One half of interviewees described how tasks were delegated and often described team members as their *friends*.

In most classes I have my friends. So, I sit with my friends... and we do our group work. It's up to us how we decide who does which bit, we choose.
(Haider)

This quotation suggests that students choose their own team members, but this was not always the case. Challenges in working with new team members were expressed by a third of

interviewees with suggestions that team work was only successful if team members supported each other and had similar attitudes towards learning. For example, one interviewee strongly argued for working with the right group of people as they recognised that challenges other than the task itself would otherwise be encountered.

Sometimes it's about finding the right group of people to work with because if you're with people who have a different attitude to you then it can be really difficult getting anything done. (Latif)

This confirms the findings from a study by Freidman and Mandel (2011) that not all students like to work with their peers. This view was shared by a majority of female interviewees who expressed their frustration with team members who did not share responsibility for a group task, and anger when this impacted on their grade. One interviewee explained that she ended up doing the task alone, and as a result of this negative experience, she would rather work alone next time.

In some classes you get forced to work with people. I had to fight with one group because they didn't want to work, and I had to do everything myself. Some of them can be really careless. You can really get affected by the grade when you work in a group. Honestly, I'd would rather work alone. (Zahra)

Burt (2004) suggests Emirati women are not prepared to be active learners and prefer to take a more passive approach to their studies. However, views expressed by interviewees suggest that this view cannot be assumed for all Emirati women in their first year at university.

Culture Matters More than Gender

Working with Emirati peers of the opposite gender rarely takes place in school, yet it is expected in private HEIs. Peer interaction is one of the factors affecting academic transition and as such, the issue of peer interactions for Emiratis is worth exploring. Almost all interviewees expressed initial concerns about meeting new students. Thirteen had pointed out that they had chosen to go to the same university as their school friends, or that they had chosen the same course and major as their school friends. Initial concerns of interacting with others were primarily expressed by female interviewees. For example, they described the initial feeling of awkwardness and nervousness when they were assigned to work with a group of male students.

When I first arrived, he made me sit next to a guy....it was really hard, and I didn't know how to communicate with him. I'm quite shy you know, and I've only ever been with classes with other girls. I would talk to the girl next to me, but I wouldn't talk to him. (Farah)

This quotation illustrates the importance of considering the interviewee's school context, and whether they were already accustomed to interacting with a different gender. This was explained by one interviewee, "There wasn't much of a transition to be quite honest, I'm personally fine with interacting with them, I've done it before at school" (Bassam). One half of the female interviewees pointed to overcoming their initial concerns. In one example, the student said it only took a few weeks for her to be more comfortable interacting with the opposite gender.

I've never interacted with boys I was a bit scared because boys are too big you know, and I'm like 'oh my God how am I going to be here with guys? I'm too scared'. But that changed after a few weeks and I'm okay now. Our future lives are going to be mixed so we have to get to know people and interact with different genders. (Khadija)

This view was shared by another interviewee who described the benefits of working with the opposite gender and in order to understand different points of view.

I want to study with boys because we have different mentalities...Boys look at things from a different perspective which I'm going to learn a lot from...Girls answer questions 90% differently to how boys do (Dahab)

Almost all interviewees shared a view that the issue of interacting with the opposite gender was of less concern than Emirati men interacting with Emirati women. Almost all interviewees were keen to share their opinions of how Emirati culture should not be seen as a barrier to interacting with others during their university experience, but that an awareness of how Emiratis should behave towards the opposite gender should always be respected. For example, one female interviewee made a comparison between interacting with Emiratis to interacting with non-Emiratis.

I think, weirdly enough it's more awkward with Emirati men because you share the same culture of.... we're not supposed to sit with each other.... and that's

what makes it even more awkward because you're both thinking the same thing but neither of you say anything. (Elham)

A similar view was shared by male interviewees with almost all describing the need to be especially respectful when interacting with Emirati women.

It was weird for me [Emirati male]. Out of respect I would only talk to them [Emirati women] if they talked to me first; I would never initiate a conversation with them because that's our culture. I even sit next to an Emirati girl in one class now so it's perfectly fine. (Fahd)

This quotation helps to explain why slightly more Emirati men than Emirati women in private HEIs find it very challenging interacting with classmates of a different gender.

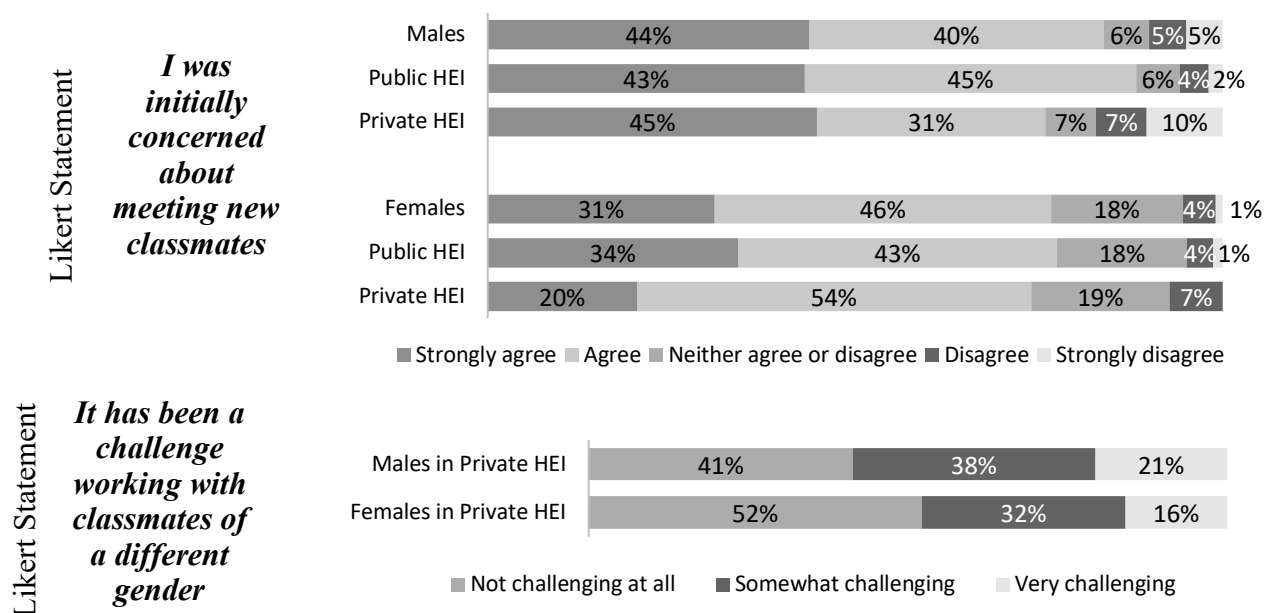


Figure 4.14. Perceptions concerning New Classmates

Male and female students were asked about their views on meeting new classmates (Figure 4.14). A majority of students (73%) were initially concerned about meeting new classmates and their views were fairly similar across institution and gender even though the biggest concern was shown by male students in public HEIs. When asked if it had been difficult meeting classmates of a different gender, a minority of students in private HEIs thought this had been very challenging. There was no significant difference between gender, but slightly more male students (21%) compared to female students (16%) found the experience very challenging.

UAE Vision and Future Workplace

Almost all interviewees shared examples of their perceived achievements during their first year. Descriptions tended to fall into three categories: an improvement in skills that can be used in the future, increased confidence and motivation, and personal goals and achievements. Thirteen interviewees described ways in which their academic skills had improved. In one example, an interviewee reflected on the quality of their work earlier in their first year and the pride they felt in improvements they had made.

It didn't take me long to learn that my writing is improving. If you see my papers in the first semester, you'd be shocked, but the more I write the more I learn. I'm really surprised at how much I've learned and even my own ability. I think this university is preparing us all for the workplace and I can see the difference in my writing already. (Iman)

The view of that their university was helping them to become better prepared for their future workplace was shared by other interviewees. In a similar example, one interviewee argues that the skills they are learning will allow them to become a more active participant in society.

I believe my skills in interaction have become better because I interact with more students every day, and in different classes.... this encouraged me to become more like an individual who participates in UAE society, not just at the university. I actually like doing research now too, and finding new information that will help me, and help the group. I've realized that it will help me in the future. (Saffron)

This argument suggests that students are aware of the potential contributions they can make to UAE society. It also confirms the views of Coates, Kelly and Naylor (2016) who assert that a sense of achievement brings with it belonging. Comparisons to school were rarely mentioned when students were asked to reflect on their first-year experience. This would suggest that there is a gradual shift away from the institutional attachment they had initially described, and a shift towards identifying themselves as university students. For example, one interviewee described their increased motivation to learn, and how this had changed since starting university.

Here makes you actually want to come to university, whereas at school you just want to escape.... here you want to learn what you can, you want to be on time. And I enjoy what I'm learning now, it's what I want to do. It used to be difficult at the start, but when you want to learn something, you will not think that it's hard or easy, you just want to learn. (Khadija)

Despite an awareness that academic challenges will be encountered during the early stages of university, a third of interviewees pointed out that they feel part of a learning community with shared goals. A student explained that this arose because students and professors have much in common.

People who are in this university are here for a reason, so they have the same goal as I do. University taught me to be an individual and follow my goals and I think that is what this university is about. I want to make a difference, and I believe I can, well I hope I can. (Bassam)

In the survey, male and female students were asked to indicate their views concerning the relevance of what they were learning, and its usefulness in the future (Figure 4.15). Fairly similar views were found across gender and type of institution with no significant differences. When asked if they thought what they were learning would be useful for the future, a majority (78%) of student agreed (*strongly agreed* or *agreed*). From the results, more male students in private HEIs strongly agreed with this statement (60%). A majority of students (62%) across gender and type of institution already know what career they will have after they have graduated, even though they are only in their first year at university. These questions were asked because of the unique nature of the UAE context and its 2021 vision. Emiratis are committed to making a contribution to their nation and the UAE vision features strongly in schools and HEIs. Such a strong national message could provide Emiratis with the added motivation to succeed at university so that they can fulfill their role for the nation.

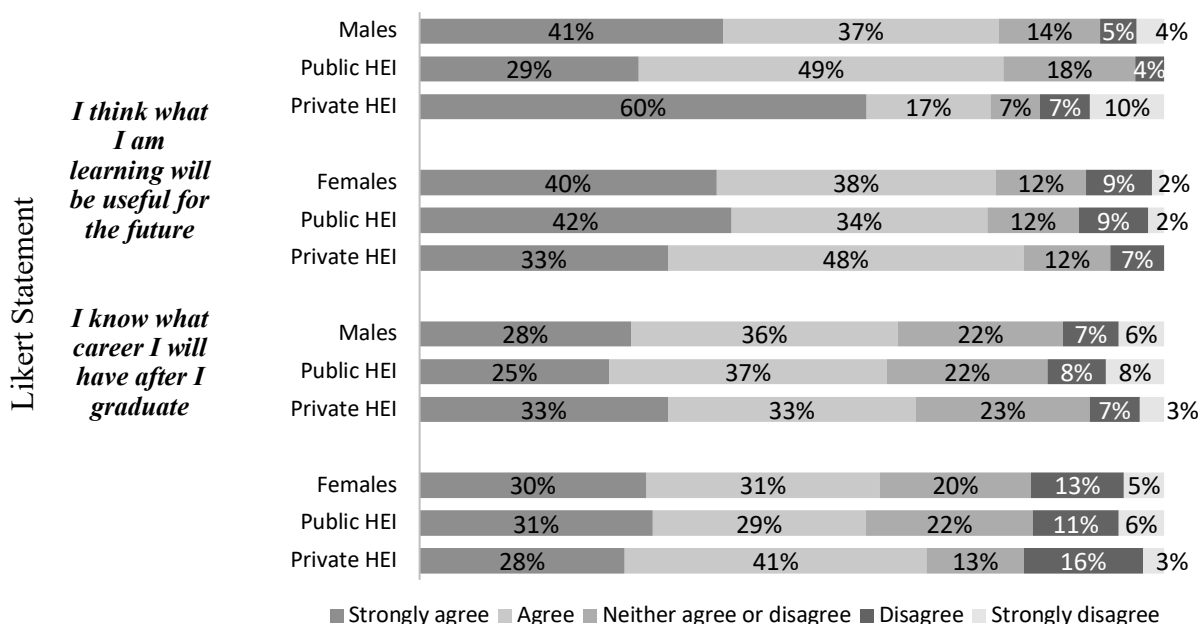


Figure 4.15. Perceptions concerning Future Learning and the Workplace

4.4 Discussion

In this section, the five themes and key findings are revisited. The conceptualization of institutional attachment and academic preparedness emerged at both the interview and online survey levels. Given these, a discussion is made on institutional attachment and how academic preparedness affects the first-year student experience of academic transition. The literature on institutional attachment recognizes that when starting university, students may be anxious about letting go of the familiar habits and routines of school life (Evans, 2000; Gale & Parker, 2014; Lowe & Cook, 2003). This anxiety could be as a result of them not understanding the difference between studying at school compared to studying at a higher education level (Crisp et al., 2009), or that they are ill-prepared for dealing with the academic demands of university life (Krause et al., 2005; Lowe & Cooke, 2003). Moreover, the literature recommends that schools should ‘up skill’ their students before they head off to university (Jones, 2011), or alternatively schools and universities should apply an integrated system of transition (Brigg, Clark, & Hall, 2012; Money

et al., 2019) to help students bridge the gap, rather than leaving them to navigate the transition alone. With regard to how institutional attachment and academic preparedness affects Emirati students in HEIs in the UAE, the results indicate institutional attachment persists throughout their first year and that the lack of academic preparedness results in similar experiences of stress and anxiety as found in previous studies.

The influence of faculty was found to be more positive than suggested in previous studies. While Kandiko and Mawer (2013) found that students thought their professors were just reading off slides, a comment almost replicating one shared by an interviewee, the reason provided is not supported by findings in this study. Kandiko and Mawer (2013) suggest that professors were just reading from the slides because they did not know the course material. No such assumption or implication was made by any of the students. In fact, 67% of first-year Emirati students claimed to like the way their professor teaches even though 28% found it challenging adapting to the new teaching style. This clearly shows that the teaching style in school is different to the style used by professors in university, and that students cannot adjust to the new style easily. It would be correct to heed Macdonald's (2000) warning against assuming that students will eventually adjust and adapt to the ways of teaching and learning expected in higher education. An explanation for students being attached to the teaching style used in school is that this style may have been used by every subject teacher over the course of the students' school life; a style that is expected to be used by all school teachers through ADEK's education reform. While some teachers may make some deviations to the school teaching 'formula', the majority tend to advocate the student-centred approach involving a set amount of groupwork for a lesson lasting no more than 50 minutes. While students claim to enjoy the university lectures, they style of teaching and session lengths have been difficult for students to adjust to. The influence of faculty, and their supportive role is clearly expressed by students through the

interviews and online survey. The findings of this study support assertions by King and Kerr (2005) that the role of faculty can be crucial and of significance in supporting students, and that when students feel they are being treated as individuals, they are more able to grow as learners (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). Even though 74% were initially concerned about the support they would get from their professor, 65% felt that their professor treated them like individuals and valued the feedback they received. The support provided by faculty for Emirati first-year students, on the whole, has been very successful but it is argued that students could be better informed about the type of support they would, or would not receive at university. This sharing of information appears to be lacking, whether it is not shared by schools or it is not provided in university brochures, a mechanism needs to be found to bridge the information gap.

Assessment anxiety featured several times in responses to interview questions and in survey responses. Even though 75% of all students knew what was expected of them in their assessments, 33% claimed to find their assessments at university to be very challenging. This finding suggests that the style of assessment at university has been difficult to adapt to. Since students have been accustomed to the style of assessments used in school, it is argued that a difference exists between the assessment styles used in schools compared to those in HEIs, and that it is this difference that results in students struggling to adapt. This statement would support Green's (2006) assertion that the style of assessment in university is very different to the assessment driven culture of school. Another aspect of faculty influence was presented in the form of academic advising and feedback, particularly after assessments. In previous studies, feedback has been found to rank low in terms of student satisfaction (Bell and Brooks, 2017; Blair, 2017; Burgess et al., 2018; NSS, 2015). The negative experience implied in the studies was expressed in some comments by interviewees which also evoked emotional responses. There are several possible reasons for this type of response. While studies suggest that the most

effective feedback is one which is personalized (Dawson et al., 2018; Ferguson, 2011, Khan & Khan, 2019), if the feedback is too generalized and not personalized enough (Jones, 2018), a student may think it does not apply to them, or that it does not give them specific enough details to enable them to understand how to improve. As a result, it can lead to frustration, particularly if a student is anxious to do well in an assessment. Another possible reason is that if the student experiences difficulty when interacting with their tutor, they will perceive any feedback as negative and reject whatever comments they receive (Ryan & Henderson, 2018; Weaver, 2006). If a student is particularly anxious about assessment results, then this type of rejection and negative reaction is more likely. It has been suggested that without an established student-faculty relationship, it can be difficult for a student to receive feedback (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). This argument resonates with the concept of institutional attachment and students being reluctant to letting go of the past; this includes letting go of the student-teacher relationships that have built up over the years when they were at school. The difficulty of letting go of an old relationship in order to welcome in a new one appears to be quite difficult for some Emirati students. Another possible reason for the negative reaction is not the relationship with their tutor but that the student's expectation regarding the quality of feedback they expect may be influenced from their pre-university experience (Robinson, Pope & Holyoak, 2013). Even though there were some examples from students of their negative experiences of feedback, approximately half of the interviewees also provided examples of positive experiences of feedback after assessments describing the feeling of being 'understood' and 'valued' by their professor. The positive responses about feedback were also indicated where 51% of those surveyed agreed to receiving detailed comments about their work, and 52% claiming to be working harder after receiving their feedback.

In developing a new learner identity, students need to feel that they belong. For that sense of belonging to continue, students need to 'do' what is expected of typical university students. One trait of university students is that they have adapted their study skills and habits from when they were at school. Results from this study found that 81% of respondents were concerned if they would have the right study skills for university. Even though students expect to their experience in university to be different to school (Balloo, 2018), they may also expect to use the same learning approach (Evans, 2000). Emirati students however, are already aware that the skills they will need in university will be different. While it is claimed that students who are well-prepared for academic study are more likely to experience an easy transition to higher education (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003), it may not necessarily be clear to student what exactly they need to do to become 'prepared'. Moving from a rigid school environment to a more open and flexible higher education environment can cause potential problems for first-year students (Money, Nixon & Graham, 2019). The new-found freedom and being in classes of such large sizes could entice students to escape from classes and coast through their first year. What appears to prevent this from happening is the pressure students feel about assessments. Interviewees comment on their GPA and the fact that every assessment contributes to their final score. In order for them to do well in assessments, they need to change their study methods and study habits. When surveyed, 87% of Emirati students claimed to have improved their study skills demonstrating a commitment to adapt to the academic demands they face in higher education. Results also showed that 40% found the workload very challenging. This implies that although they are committed to adapting their ways of learning, the experience has been a challenging one. Meeting the academic demands was a concern discussed by several interviewees who described the additional time they spent studying compared to when they were school students, and to the new methods of studying they were developing.

Students are expected to ‘perform’ when making presentations to their class. While 75% were initially concerned about making presentations, it was not clear whether they were students who had previous experience of giving presentations when they were at school or not. Interviewees provided mixed responses when asked about giving presentations with some describing how nervous they were every time they needed to speak to their group, to others who claimed to have presented so many times in school that they felt no nerves or stress when presenting. This points to the academic preparedness of students and how it may differ if a student had previously attended a private school or a public school. It would also suggest that some form of alignment between schools and universities in training student on presentation skills to different types of audiences would be beneficial.

Findings from this study suggest that Emirati students are happy to work with others on group tasks but prefer either working with their ‘friends’ or with those who are like minded. These findings emerged primarily from interview responses with an equal number of those describing positive experiences of teamwork to those describing negative experiences. One of the underlying reasons relates to assessment anxiety. When students feel under pressure to do well in an assessment, or equally are worried about failing, they need every member of their group to show commitment to the team’s shared goal. When students are placed in a group with people they do not know, a situation they would rarely have experienced during their school experience, assumptions are made that all team members know the team goal and are committed in working towards it. This returns us to the argument of institutional attachment with first-year students assuming the rules that applied to groupwork in school will still apply now that they are in university. The frustration however, is when team members pull in different directions or if some members do not take the task ‘as seriously as others do’. While a low proportion of

students surveyed were concerned about meeting new peers, the experience of working with others did create challenges for some first-year students.

From the results it was found that there were two areas in which significant difference were found between the experiences of first-year male and female students: one area was with assessments and the second with study skills. Male students tended to be more concerned about doing well in assessments and whether they had the right study skills required to be able to learn effectively at university than female students. Whilst the concern about assessments was experienced initially, it was dissipated quite quickly, and results showed that a significantly higher proportion of male than female students felt that they had improved in their assessments during the year. The finding raises several points: male students may be unduly concerned about assessments at university, or they may not have taken assessments as seriously as perhaps they should have at school. With knowledge of the inflexible nature of the university assessment system compared to school, this could have made them anxious. Responses from interviewees seem to suggest that this is likely to be the case with several comments being made about students being able to repeat assessments, or having deadlines extended in school, whereas they battled with the strictness of assessment rules at university. An alternative reason is that the majority of Emirati male students are required to complete a term of national service between finishing school and starting university. With a larger gap in time between experiencing school assessments and being prepared for university assessments, male students could feel an increased level of anxiety. Equally this theory could be applied to the issue of male students being more concerned than female students about having the right study skills for higher education. Another possibility is that female students feel that they are better prepared for assessments from their school experience, or that there is no time gap between leaving school and starting university, so they are still familiar with their study habits. An interesting point to make here is that the

adjustment time for male students to feel that they had improved in assessments was promising. The stress and worry of performing badly in an assessment appear to have reduced for male students during their first year as they adjust and understand the requirements of higher education.

The student experience of academic transition in public HEIs was similar for male and female students. A point to make here is that students in public schools are strictly segregated, which is also the case for public HEIs. Students in private schools are gender-segregated when there is a percentage of Emirati students on roll. What can be suggested using the contextual information is that male and female students are for the most part gender segregated in school and again gender segregated in university. While results showed very few differences between the experiences of male and female student in public HEIs, a sharp contrast was seen when comparing this to their experiences in private HEIs. At first glance, it would appear that male students in private HEIs have a distinct advantage to female students. This contradicts many studies that suggest females have the advantage in higher education (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Dayioglu & Turut-Asik, 2007; Fryer, 2017; Kindlon, 2006; Ridge, 2010). Whilst contradictory findings are reported suggesting that there is no distinct advantage held by male or female higher education students (Johnson, Robson, & Taengnoi, 2014; Lindberg, Hyde, Petersen, & Linn, 2010), this study presents a distinct male advantage. Male students have a much more positive experience than female students in the following areas: liking the way their professor teaches, working harder as a result of feedback, feeling that expectations are shared from the start, knowing that staff make an effort to understand their difficulties, having professors who make them feel like an individual. For each of the features, a significantly higher proportion of male student than female students had these experiences. With the glowing view male students had of faculty, the positive results continued when looking at assessments. Male students were more

concerned initially about assessments (as referred to in Section 5.2) but they also felt that they had made improvement in assessments during their first year. They also felt that marks were returned to them in good time. With regard to study skills and habits, following initial concern about having the right skills for university, they thought their study skills had improved, their confidence had increased when giving presentations, they were more likely to have developed a study plan and they were studying for the longest. It was also in private HEIs where male students are studying the longest hours compared to all other groups. The differences are quite staggering, and the findings raise two very important questions: What are private HEIs doing that is having such a positive effect on male Emirati students? What is causing the success of academic transition of female student in private HEIs to fall behind that of their male counterparts?

One thought had been that male students are inherently more confident than female students, but if this was the case, a similar pattern of differences should have been found when comparing the experiences of male and female students in public universities. However, this was not the case. Perhaps private HEIs are failing in their provision for Emirati female students in their first year. If both male and female students attend the same induction program, considerations must be made to ensure it is both male and female friendly. In the next chapter, recommendations are put forward to address the significant differences between the experiences of male and female students at private HEIs providing suggestions about how they can be overcome.

4.5 Chapter Summary

As the findings and analysis were presented, patterns emerged regarding the student experience of their first year, the contrasting experiences of male and female students, and how

some experiences were significantly different depending on the type of HEI a student was attending. To a large degree institutional attachment was evident for the majority of students, particularly during the first few weeks of university. Male and female students in public HEIs had mostly similar experiences. Female students in public HEIs had a slightly more positive experience than their counterparts in private HEIs. The main difference was found between the experiences of male and female students in private HEIs, with the latter fairing less favourably in several aspects. Faculty influence on the student experience varied with male students in private HEIs expressing a significantly more positive view of the teaching, feedback and support they received from their professors. They expressed greater initial concerns about assessments, having the right skills for university, and adapting to new ways of learning. However, they also expressed greater improvements such as having more confidence in making presentations, making improvements in their assessments, and in developing new study skills. The issue of male and female students in private HEIs working together appeared to be more of a concern for male students and also more challenging, but this was only when they needed to work with Emirati women. This was an unexpected finding but illustrates how UAE culture takes precedence even when students are in an international setting.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This study explores the experiences of academic transition of Emirati year-one students in the UAE, in particular, the role of gender and the type of institution they attended in influencing their ability to navigate through transition in becoming undergraduate students. A mixed-method research design was adopted. Data collection involved interviews with 20 first-year students followed by an online survey of 377 students. The works of Bridges (2009, 2011) was used as a theoretical foundation for the study. Bridges views the experience of transition in three phases: *endings* that are triggered by loss with the letting go of familiarity and routines, *neutral zone* where individuals are still attached to their endings but where the new situation is being acknowledged, and *beginnings* where students start to embrace the changes they are experiencing. Although these phases represent a sequence, an individual may encounter more than one phase simultaneously and central to the framework is the focus on process rather than goals and moving at one's own pace.

From the findings, patterns emerged regarding the student experience of their first year, the contrasting experiences of male and female students, and how some experiences were significantly different depending on the type of HEI a student was attending. The *endings* phase was evident, particularly during the first few weeks of university with the majority of students referring to their school experiences. Male and female students in public HEIs had mostly similar experiences. Female students in public HEIs had a slightly more positive experience than their counterparts in private HEIs. The main difference was found between the experiences of male and female students in private HEIs, with the former fairing more favourably in several aspects. The issue of male and female students in private HEIs working together appeared to be more of a concern for male students which was an unexpected finding but illustrates how UAE culture takes precedence.

5.1 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the literature of the first-year experience of transition to higher education in the following ways:

- This study is the first UAE mixed-method study to have inquired into the academic experiences of Emirati students during their first year at a HEI in the UAE. The study also investigates how those experiences differ between male and female students and the type of HEI they attend.
- This study reveals that there are several similarities between the experiences of Emirati students in their first-year in HEIs in the UAE to the experiences of first-year students in other countries such as the US, UK and Australia where most research studies have taken place
- It was also evident in discussions of the key findings that there are significant differences between the experiences of male and female Emirati students when they attend private HEIs in the UAE. These differences include concerns about assessments, having the right skills for university, adapting to new ways of learning, having confidence in making presentations, and making improvements in assessments. This could form the basis for a future research study
- Although this study was mainly focused on the student experience, it provides recommendations for practitioners in school and HEIs to improve the student experience thus contributing to the UAE's Agenda of developing a nation of Emiratis who can contribute to the development of their knowledge economy
- The study has also shown that due to the different factors affecting academic transition and the individual experience of each one, the use of Bridges transition theory as a theoretical framework proved challenging in its application. Identifying the *endings* and

beginnings phases was less problematic but being able to categorise where overlaps between those phases and the *neutral zone* occurred proved difficult. Each student experiences transition at their own pace. For example, one student might be in the *beginnings* phase with study habits but still in the *endings* phase in dealing with assessments. Another example is if a student has a clear understanding of the learning expectations of one lecturer but struggles to understand what is required from another

5.2 Limitations of the Study

On reflection, there are two limitations of this study:

Small-scale study: Even though this study included a number of public and private HEIs in the UAE, it was a small-scale case study. Small-scale case studies can provide stories which are helpful in describing phenomena, and in developing theory. This study provides theoretical generalisations offering insights into the experiences of academic transition of first-year Emirati students at HEIs in the UAE. It does not claim to provide empirical generalisations to studies beyond this sample. Many researchers support the claim that generalisations from case studies are often based on theoretical ideas, and that these theoretical generalisations are more plausible than empirical generalisations to similar cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Ridder, 2017; Rowley, 2002; Ylikoski, 2017).

Lengthy ethics procedure: Another limitation was in gaining access to universities and the sensitive nature of the study. The UAE prides itself on being portrayed as an ambitious and continually improving nation with its national citizens and government institutions being a source of pride. Researching the first-year student experience has the potential for students to describe negative experiences of higher education which in turn would reflect negatively on the provision of HEIs in the UAE. This was a risk that the HEIs approached were not prepared to

take. Gaining access to a public or private HEI proved challenging with every public HEI rejecting an application to conduct the study. After a lengthy period of time, and advice from UoL, the researcher navigated through the problem and advertised for willing participants to the study. This was a successful strategy, but another limitation will be in publishing the findings without portraying the UAE in a negative light.

5.3 Recommendations for Practice

A number of recommendations are proposed based on the findings of this project. They include collaboration between schools and universities, having a school/HEI liaison, creating a skills development summer program, and developing a tailored induction program for male and female students.

Collaboration: Given the challenges associated with students needing to adapt to the new style of teaching in university, and the new study skills they require, a collaboration between schools and HEIs is proposed. This collaboration would have a number of aims:

- to conduct a gap analysis between the study skills taught in school and those that students are expected to have in university;
- to ensure students are sufficiently prepared for, and familiar with the style of teaching in higher education through a series of team-taught university style sessions taught in school;
- to ensure students are sufficiently familiar with the style of assessments used in university by providing schools with sample assessments and rubrics that can be adapted and used in schools;

- to develop a program whereby university professors can observe lessons in school, and school teachers can observe lectures in university, in order for each group to have an understanding of each learning context and to share good practice.

Establishing an integrated program and team strategy between schools and universities will help to establish stronger links between higher education and school education and support frameworks for the development of professional knowledge and associated training. The collaboration can help both groups observe and understand what goes on in the school classroom and what goes on during university sessions, thus ensuring a more consistent application of strategies. Equally, collaboration between teachers/professors will encourage communication and information sharing such that professors have a clearer picture of student abilities and learning needs, whilst teachers will have a better understanding of how to prepare their students for study in higher education.

School/ HEI liaison: It is recommended that every university has a designated member of staff whose primary role is to act as a liaison with a specific number of schools in order to ensure students have information about the university experience itself. Currently, schools have career guidance counselors who provide entry requirement information but there are no specific liaison officers from HEIs who are directly linked with schools. In their role, they would provide a program of information sessions to final year school students including topics such as:

- making the switch from public school education (gender-segregated) to a private university (co-education);
- what to expect in the first few weeks in a public university;
- what academic support to expect at university;
- dealing with assessments in university – understanding the rules;

The dual school/HEI liaison role can be extended to provide final year school students with one-to-one sessions so that their personal needs are discussed, and their support is more personalized. This is particularly the case for male and female students and the type of HEI they intend to attend. The program may extend to having one or more current first-year students to visit a school and discuss their academic experiences (challenges and successes) as well as sharing advice for the soon-to-be new first-year students. Peer mentors tend to be assigned after students have already started at an HEI, this proposal is for the mentoring to begin when students are still at school.

Skills development summer program: While HEIs provide writing centres with a view to supporting students as and when they request it, it is recommended that a more structured program should be offered to students. Results from this study found that 81% of students were concerned about having the right skills for university, and that they were faced with challenges when trying to sufficiently develop those effective study skills. It is recommended that students attend a summer study skills program one week before the official start of university where they can expand on skills such as note taking, scanning, summarizing, academic writing, time management, and developing a study plan. Development of the program could be through the school/HEI collaboration team and overseen by the school/HEI liaison officer so that there is consistency across the program and input provided from those directly involved in preparing students for the experience of academic transition.

Tailored induction programs: First-year students have a choice of attending a public or private HEI in the UAE, or equally they may decide to study abroad. As indicated by the results of this study, significant differences were found between the experiences of male and female students at

private HEIs. The differences appeared across the key aspects of transition indicated in chapters 4 and 5: faculty influence, assessment, learner identity and skills development, and working with others. It is recommended that induction programs should be tailored to meet the very different needs of male and female students in private HEIs, that is there should be a different bespoke induction program for male Emirati students, and a different bespoke program for female Emirati students. One particular challenge highlighted when working with others, was the cultural issue of Emirati men and Emirati women working together. While universities expect students to partake in group discussions and be actively involved in group work, the cultural aspect of male and female Emiratis working together should be handled sensitively during the induction program. It is recommended that this session could be run by a group of Emirati students (male and female) who can role model how group work can be done and who are already attending university as part of the UAE volunteering initiative.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Studies

To help improve knowledge in the field of transition to higher education, a number of future studies are recommended at a school level, institution level, and national level:

School level: to explore how schools support Emirati students in their preparation for higher education and to determine if this done differently in public schools and private schools. A limitation of this study was that it focused only on the type of HEI that students were attending and not how they had been prepared by their previous school for their journey into higher education. By understanding how schools prepare students, insight can be made into understanding ‘why’ some experiences are more challenging for particular groups of students than others.

Institution level: To explore the transition programs currently being offered at private and public HEIs to see if they are different, and if so, to what extent and why. This is of particular importance when male students in private HEIs appear to have a more positive experience than any other group of Emirati students. There is an opportunity for public and private HEIs to share the strategies they use for induction in their institutions, as both could benefit from sharing and further developing strategies that have been successful.

National level: This study only explored the experiences of Emirati students in the UAE. The experience of academic transition of Emirati students who travel abroad could also be explored and comparisons made between the two studies.

5.5 Reflecting on the Research Process

On reflection, I have developed both personally and professionally through my doctoral education. This development was supported by the University of Liverpool and my supervisors. I regularly self-evaluated my own performance, and it was also evaluated by my supervisor. These evaluations were reviewed in monthly development meetings. I have learned to set targets, develop action plans and identify resources to help reach my targets. This was most evident when I became disillusioned as I struggled to obtain ethical approval for my research study at any local HEI in the UAE. Overcoming obstacles, being resilient and learning to identify resources is a skill I have since developed. I have a broader and deeper knowledge of my field of study and am able to summarise and critically reflect on my own and others results. I also have a good understanding of how to conduct research in an ethical manner. With these tools, I am now equipped to manage my own research project from start to finish.

On a professional level, I have been able to network with my peers and those working in the higher education sector in the region. My project was on a small scale, but a similar study

could be conducted in other Gulf States where gender segregation still occurs in the school or higher education sector. Networking and publishing my research could open up the possibility for further research in the field and the potential for collaborative work. I look forward to writing research articles on my study and to further contribute to research in the field of student experience of academic transition in the first year in higher education.

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APPENDIX 1
Ethical Approval Form

Dear Bushra Foroodian			
I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.			
Sub-Committee:		EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)	
Review type:		Expedited	
PI:		Bushra Foroodian (Supervised by Dr. Ming Cheng)	
School:		Lifelong Learning	
Title:		Exploring Students' Academic Transition to University: A Study of the UAE National Students	
First Reviewer:		Dr. Morag Gray	
Second Reviewer:		Dr. Kalman Winston	
Other members of the Committee		Dr. Lucilla Crosta, Dr. Julie Regan, Dr Janet Hanson	
Date of Approval:		10 th April, 2018	
The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:			
Conditions			
1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.	

This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at <http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc>.

Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).

Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.

Kind regards,

Lucilla Crosta

Chair, EdD. VPREC

APPENDIX 2

Interview Protocol

Title of Research Project:

Exploring Students' Academic Transition to University: A Study of the UAE National Students

Invitation Paragraph

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends and relatives if you wish. We would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

Thank you for reading this.

Purpose of the study

A research study is being conducted by a research student undertaking their EdD at the University of Liverpool. The study is to examine the academic experiences of Emirati students during their first year at a university in Abu Dhabi. The study will compare the experiences of male and female students who had previously attended gender-segregated schools. It will also investigate how the type of university (private or public) has impacted on their experience and what the university has provided to support their academic transition.

The research activities are intended to help researchers understand the experiences of its UAE citizens; the nation's human capital. This project requires the researcher to adopt a practical research approach to understand the experiences of first year students during transition.

For their study, the researcher intends to:

- Analyse the experiences of academic transition for Emirati students
- Analyse how the experiences change during the first year at university
- Analyse how provision for first-year students at university has supported the transition
- Compare and contrast these experiences for male and female students

The researcher will collect interview data from 20 Emirati students. They will also collect data via a large-scale questionnaire issued to Emirati university students in Abu Dhabi.

Why have I been invited to take part?

To understand the experiences of academic transition, Emirati students in the first year of their undergraduate course at a university in Abu Dhabi will be invited to participate in the study. The students must have an IELTS level of 6.5 or above as the research study will be conducted in English. The students will all be invited to participate in the survey. 10 male and 10 female Business Administration undergraduate students will be invited to participate in the interview. All participating Emirati students would have completed their secondary school education in a public school in Abu Dhabi and are now attending a university also in Abu Dhabi. The university they are now attending can be either a private university or a public university.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part and you can ask any questions before making that decision. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without incurring any disadvantage. You do not have to give a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

The researcher is a student undertaking their EdD at the University of Liverpool. If you decide to take part in the interview and have signed the consent form the researcher will discuss the interview procedure with you and arrange to interview you. The interview can take place via Skype. Alternatively, it can be conducted face to face. The interview location will be mutually agreed and one with minimal distraction and where you will feel comfortable. It will also be a mutually agreed place to ensure total privacy and confidentiality. The interview can be held at your university campus, at a meeting room in a local school or in a quiet public place. It will take place during business hours. The interview will not impact on your teaching and learning time at university. The interview will be in English and all participants are expected to have a level of English proficiency equivalent to 6.5 in IELTS. It will last approximately 40 minutes and be based on your academic experiences during your first year at university and is designed to be flexible. The interviewer will require you to answer questions in as much detail as you can and ask questions if there is anything you do not understand. The interview will be recorded, subject to your permission. All recordings of data on audio-equipment will be stored securely on a password protected computer. When the interview is complete it will be transcribed, and the Principal Investigator will give you the opportunity to check the accuracy of the transcription. Even if you have decided to take part, you are still free to stop your participation at any time during the interview and to have research data relating to you withdrawn without giving any reason.

The researcher will also be employing anonymous online surveys to Emirati students attending a public or private university in Abu Dhabi. No names of individuals or of the university they attend will be collected so anonymity will be preserved. The survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. The questions will be written in English and responses

should also be written in English. The survey will be sent out via Survey Monkey and submission of a questionnaire implies your consent. Incomplete surveys will not be included in this study.

Are there any risks in taking part?

The foreseeable risks are minimal and no greater than you would encounter in your daily life. There is minimal risk of confidentiality as the interview will take place in a private place, the university will not be identified, any third parties mentioned in the interview will be anonymised and the surveys will also be anonymised. Contact details of interviewees will be removed and names will be anonymised prior to dissemination of the research. There is a minimal risk of distress. If you should experience any discomfort or disadvantage as part of the research this should be made known to the researcher immediately and provision will be made so you are referred to the student support department for support. In this event you will have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time and with no adverse consequences.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

The benefit of participating in this study is in contributing to a body of research about Emirati experiences of higher education in Abu Dhabi and helping to shape future research in this field.

What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting the researcher, Bushra Foroodian on +971567753081 or on bushra.foroodian@online.liverpool.ac.uk and we will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to us with then you should contact the Research

Governance Officer at ethics@liv.ac.uk. When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher(s) involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

Will my participation be kept confidential?

The researcher and supervisor are the only people who have access to the places where all data will be stored. All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will be held securely and destroyed after 5 years. The audio recordings of your interview made during this research will be used only for analysis, no other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. All information gathered from the interviews and surveys will be held on password-locked computer files and a back-up will be held on a password-locked external hard drive stored in a locked cabinet. No data will be accessed by anyone other than me; and anonymity of the material will be protected by using false names. No data will be able to be linked back to any individual taking part in the interview and survey including third parties. In reporting of the research findings, I will not reveal the names of any participants or the university where you study. At all times there will be no possibility of you as individuals being linked with the data.

What will happen to the results of the study?

I will produce a thesis report summarising the main findings, which will be made available to you. I also plan to disseminate the research findings through publication and conferences. You will not be identifiable from the results unless you have consented to being so.

What will happen if I want to stop taking part?

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, without explanation. Results up to the period of withdrawal may be used, if you are happy for this to be done. Otherwise you may request that they are destroyed, and no further use is made of them. Results may only be withdrawn prior to anonymisation.

Who can I contact if I have further questions?

If you have any further questions, you can contact the Principal Researcher, Bushra Foroodian at bushra.foroodian@online.liverpool.ac.uk or on +971 567753081.

Contact Details

My contact details are:

Bushra Foroodian, 00971-566-775-3081, bushra.foroodian@online.liverpool.ac.uk

My supervisor's contact details are:

Dr. Ming Cheng, ming.cheng@online.liverpool.ac.uk

The contact details of the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool are:

001-612-312-1210 (USA number)

Email address liverpooethics@ohecampus.com

Please keep/print a copy of the Participant Information Sheet for your reference. Please contact me and/or the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool with any question or concerns you may have.

This form is being issued on [date to be confirmed] where you will have 7 days to consider any questions you may. Once any concerns you may have or questions you may wish to ask have been addressed to your satisfaction, you will be asked to sign the Participation Consent Form and send it to me via email. The research will then take place during the week beginning [date to be confirmed].

Bushra Foroodian

_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

Interview Questions

Changes in the Learning Environment:

- *How would you describe the learning environment at your university? Is it different from when you were at high school? If so, what are the differences?*

Probes: Classrooms, departments, faculty, lectures in auditorium, university overall, open or controlled environment, size of campus, knowing what is where, more people, don't know everyone, different people in different classes, gender segregated or mixed environment

- *How have you adjusted to these differences? Are you still adjusting?*

Probes: Induction, pre-visit, open days, early contact with staff, map of campus, handbooks, knowing some people who already attend

Changes in Learning Expectations:

- *How do you understand the learning expectations of your university? Are they any different from your high school experiences?*

Probes: The need for more independent learning, doing your own research, using free time effectively, working with peers, working outside of university hours, use of library and other facilities, writing skills, communication skills

- *How have you adjusted to these differences? Are you still adjusting?*

Probes: Learning experiences by interacting with information (seeking and using) and with people, formal/informal learning through information found, growth as a student through information found, learning that has influenced knowledge, skills, and competencies, the influence of self-efficacy / self-confidence towards searching for information

Changes in Assessment:

- *How do you understand the assessments at your university? How is it different to when you were at school?*

Probes: Determining the new types of assessments such as presentations, group tasks, projects, tutorials open book exams etc., determining the usefulness of information to close existing gaps (knowledge, skills, and competencies), determining how to use or apply the information found to progress, reaction towards information that is not useful.

- *How have you adjusted to these differences? Are you still adjusting?*

Probes: Learning experiences by interacting with information (seeking and using) and with people, formal/informal learning through information found, growth as a student through information found, learning that has influenced knowledge, skills, and competencies, the influence of self-efficacy / self-confidence towards searching for information

Overall:

- *Tell me about the experiences you have had that have been most challenging academically. What made them so difficult? How were they different to when you were at school? How are you overcoming those challenges?*

Probes: Insights and experiences from the academic changes between university and school, pros and cons

- *Tell me about the academic experiences that you have particularly enjoyed during your first year. What made them so enjoyable? How were they different to when you were at school?*

Probes: Insights and experiences from the academic changes between university and school, the desire to want to seek and use academic information to grow, the desire to want to learn and grow through academic experiences, the desire to take action for one's growth

- *How has your university helped you to develop academically as an undergraduate?*

Probes: Insights and experiences from support and information provided by the university (e.g. induction, handbooks, lecturers, support personnel etc.), information accuracy, accessibility, ease of use, user-friendliness, format, and presentation (provided by the university), communication channels provided by the university to gather required information, combination of formal and informal support

Wrap-up:

- *I have basically covered all the questions I wanted to ask. Do you have anything else you would like to add?*

Probes: Any other information deemed useful but not covered by the previous questions.

APPENDIX 3

Participant Information Sheet

Thank you for your willingness and time to participate in the survey. Please use the ‘Next’ and ‘Prev’ buttons to navigate through the survey. The following page explains your rights as a study participant. Your participation is completely voluntary, and all responses are kept confidential. The survey will begin once you hit the ‘Next’ button at the bottom of the following page. Thank you!

Informed Consent

Title of the Study: Exploring Students’ Academic Transition to University: A Study of the UAE Nationals Students

Research Purpose: To examine UAE national students’ experience of academic transition to universities.

Permission Granted: The University of Liverpool has given ethical approval for this study.

Risks and Benefits: Your participation will remain anonymous and I will not require you to give any identification details. This is an anonymous online version for you to complete.

Researcher Details:

Name of Researcher, Department, Telephone & Email:

Bushra Foroodian

Doctoral Student, Leadership in Higher Education, the University of Liverpool (Online EdD programme)

056 7753081 bushra.foroodian@online.liverpool.ac.uk/ bushraforoodian@hotmail.com

Questions/Concerns

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting

bushra.foroodian@online.liverpool.ac.uk and I will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me with then you could contact my supervisor whose details can be seen below or contact the Research Governance Officer at ethics@liv.ac.uk. When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher(s) involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

My Supervisor's contact details are:

Professor Ming Cheng/ ming.cheng@online.liverpool.ac.uk

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

The contact details of the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool are:

001-612-312-1210 (USA number)/ liverpoolethics@ohecampus.com

Dear participant

You are being invited to voluntarily participate in a research study. Being a first-year student at a university in the UAE, your views about your academic transition experience will be sought by this survey.

You are free to skip any of the survey items that you do not want to answer or withdraw at any time without explanation and without experiencing a disadvantage.

Please kindly read the following informed consent statements:

- I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to skip them.
- I understand that this study will be conducted under the close supervision of the researcher's thesis supervisor Professor Ming Cheng of the University of Liverpool and I can contact her if I feel the need to.
- I understand and agree that once I submit my data it will become anonymised and I will therefore no longer be able to withdraw my data.
- Completion of this anonymous survey will constitute giving my informed consent for participation in this study.

Thank you for taking part in this study.

APPENDIX 4

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project:	Exploring Students' Academic Transition to University: A Study of the UAE National Students	Please initial
Researcher:	Bushra Foroodian	
1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated 10 April 2018 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.		
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.		
3. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the purpose of transcribing the interview.		
4. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications		
5. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.		
6. I agree to take part in the above study.		

Participant name

Date

Signature

_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

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APPENDIX 5

Worked Example of Thematic Analysis

This example shows how thematic analysis was undertaken to generate the theme *Influence of Faculty* from the qualitative data. After familiarization with the interview data, initial codes were generated. In this example some excerpts from interview transcripts are shown in the table. I worked through each transcript, coding every segment that was relevant to the research question. The relevant segments are shown in bold. Initial codes were generated with reference to the relevant segments. These codes were a combination of descriptive and interpretive codes.

Initial Codes	Participant Responses
Comparisons made with experience from school.	Basically in school teachers would explain anything we didn't understand and they would go through it again and again and again until everyone understands it.....But in university the teacher would come give the lecture and leave . (P4)
University lecturing.	It's not his responsibility to get you to understand, like very much, like school maybe. In school they have so much attention on you . But in universities the doctor just come and tell you about the lecture then you have to understand it or write notes, or you come to him in the office hours. (P1)
	It tends to be all lectures and we don't really have activities. (P11)

Actively seeking advice.	<p>For an accurate answer I would go directly to my professor and that's what I advise new students, newcomers to university to do. Whatever problems you face even if you are shy even if you fail the test go back to your professor because he's the only one who's gonna help you. (P2)</p>
Support from academic advisor.	<p>I had help from my professor, she really helped me and when she saw my work she said it's really good you just need to fix a little bit of grammar, I had some grammar mistakes. So she told me what I needed to do to make it better. (P4)</p> <p>The feedback has been very good; it's just a matter of believing in yourself and working on some other stuff. (P8)</p>
Emotional responses after meeting academic advisor.	<p>I took this course and the professor would give me really low grades...so he said if you want a better paper grade you should meet me, so I met with him twice, but he still gave me on my other paper the same grade. I kept telling him what I was gonna do and he would just say okay, he wasn't helpful at all. (P12)</p> <p>Yes, for example I went and asked her like three times like after class and all she said was I don't know, it's about what your topic is about. ...I hate this type of teachers because you're kind of lost in these kind of projects. (P5)</p>

	<p>The teacher had a way of teaching that wasn't something that I can understand or take in the information. It wasn't the right way that I will understand. Maybe other students could understand but I couldn't. And every time I'd go up for help and he would say we did this in class. I was really upset (P6)</p> <p>I told him, "I'm a shy person and I don't like interacting with people that I don't know". But he told me, "Why don't do try something new, why won't you change your personality?" And I kept thinking about that until it really, like his words kept repeating in my head and I was actually convinced with what he said. Now it's much easier. (P6)</p> <p>Confidence building. He is like the best teacher that taught me there. He was the one who encouraged me to stay, you know when you just wanna leave and there is someone pulling you back? It was him. He was so helpful for me and he was so sweet and I will still go speak with him until now, even if I have a new advisor. And he wouldn't say no. (P7)</p> <p>Being treated as an adult. In our faculty our teachers our professors they actually treat us like humans not like little kids anymore. (P9)</p> <p>I think they treat us like adults, yes they treat us, I won't say like equals but they treat us like individuals. (P14)</p>
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When the process of initial coding had been completed, I worked through the codes again and generated new ones or modified existing ones. There was considerable overlap between the coding stage and the stage of identifying themes and each stage was revisited several times. I examined the codes and saw that some fitted together into broader themes. I continued to review, modify and develop the themes, checking that the data with each theme supported it. The table below shows an example of modified codes, the subthemes they fit in to, and the theme *Influence of Faculty*.

Theme	Subthemes	Modified Codes
Influence of Faculty	Teaching style. Impact of feedback. Academic advising.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comparison to prior experience of teaching styles ▪ Lecturing ▪ Encouragement and motivation ▪ Varying quality of feedback ▪ Emotional response to feedback ▪ Confidence building ▪ Being treated as an individual

APPENDIX 6

First-Year University Students Survey 2019 (UAE)

Adapted using CEQ and Lowe and Cook's (2003) survey

Basic Demographics

The first set of questions asks about your current status as a student:

1. What is your gender?
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
2. Are you an Emirati national?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
3. Are you a first-year university/college student in the UAE?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
4. What type of university/college are you attending?
 - ☐ Government
 - ☐ Private
5. What type of high school did you attend before university?
 - ☐ Government
 - ☐ Private
 - ☐ Both
6. Did you attend national service prior to starting university?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

7. What is your major or intended major? (please choose only one). If you have more than one major in different fields, please choose the one that best aligns with your career interest.

- Applied languages (e.g. Arabic, English literature, French literature)
- Business and Economics
- Education
- Engineering
- Food & Agriculture
- Humanities and Social Sciences (e.g. Geography, History, Journalism, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology)
- IT
- Law
- Medicine & Health Science
- Sciences (e.g. Biology, Chemistry, Math, Physics, Geology)

Initial concerns when starting university					
These questions ask you about your initial concerns when starting your first year at university. To what extent do you feel each of the following was a concern? You can choose 'not applicable' if you feel it is not a concern.					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree/ not applicable	Agree	Strongly agree
8. Academic work (doing well in class, workload, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Developing skills related to note-taking, studying, time management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. Doing well in assessments, projects, research	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. Making presentations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. Obtaining support from my	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

professors					
13. Meeting new and current students	O	O	O	O	O
Course Experience The next set of questions ask about your course experience. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? You can choose 'not applicable' if you neither agree nor disagree.					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree/ not applicable	Agree	Strongly agree
14. My professor explains things really well	O	O	O	O	O
15. Staff take the time to understand when I am struggling with my studies	O	O	O	O	O
16. Professors get tests and assignment marks back to	O	O	O	O	O

me in good time					
17. The staff put a lot of time into giving written comments about my work	O	O	O	O	O
18. I often make contributions to class discussions	O	O	O	O	O
19. The course helped me improve my skills in written communication	O	O	O	O	O
20. I can summarize major points and information from class notes or readings	O	O	O	O	O
21. The course helped me to develop a plan for my own work	O	O	O	O	O

22. *I have a tutor who gives me private lessons to help improve my GPA	O	O	O	O	O
23. It was clear from staff what they expected from their students	O	O	O	O	O
24. I understand what is required to do well in my assignments	O	O	O	O	O
25. *I only study the learning material that will be in the examination	O	O	O	O	O
26. *The professors seem more interested in testing what I memorized than what I understood	O	O	O	O	O

27. I work harder as a result of feedback from my professor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
28. I spend more time studying for university than I did when I was at school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
29. How many hours a week do you spend studying outside of scheduled class times?	<input type="radio"/> 0-5 h	<input type="radio"/> 6-10 h	<input type="radio"/> 11-15 h	<input type="radio"/> 16-20 h	<input type="radio"/> >20 h
30. I think what I am learning will be useful for the future	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
31. I know what career I will have after I graduate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
32. The professors really treat students as individuals and	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

not just numbers					
Challenges during Transition These questions are about the challenges you may have faced during your first year. Experiences in the following are different in high school and university. To what extent have you felt that each difference has been difficult during your first year at university? You can choose ‘not applicable’ if you feel there has been no difference.					
	Not challenging at all	Somewhat challenging		Very challenging	
33. The approach to teaching (lectures, tutorials, problem-based learning)	O	O		O	
34. Amount of information to cope with my studies	O	O		O	
35. Level of challenge understanding the course material	O	O		O	
36. The mode of learning (learning in groups, self-	O	O		O	

study, etc.)					
37. Types of assessments (exams, graded assignments, quizzes, etc.)	O		O		O
38. Working with classmates of a different gender	O		O		O
Successes of Transition These questions are about your achievements. To what extent do you view how successful you now are in each of the following? You can choose 'not applicable' if you feel there was no difference.					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree/ not applicable	Agree	Strongly agree
39. Performing well in written assignments	O	O	O	O	O
40. Developing effective study skills	O	O	O	O	O

41. Presenting ideas and information confidently when speaking to others	O	O	O	O	O
42. Not allowing distractions to prevent me from completing my tasks on time	O	O	O	O	O
43. Knowing when to work alone and when to consult with others	O	O	O	O	O
44. Learning from constructive feedback so I don't make the same mistakes again	O	O	O	O	O